

# The Great Journey

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Summary: The titanic clash between two alliances, and the bravery, honor, and commitment of those involved, will determine the fate of all " and reveal the truth, along with darker secrets and corruption at the highest levels of leadership.

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\*\*Read the Author's Note first! If you don't and flame me because of a reason that I mention in there, then you really are an idiot.**  
> <strong>

\_Only doing this once"the legal disclaimer: I don't own Halo or any parts of its characters, plot, books, etc. No matter how much I wish I did.\_

\_\*\*A/N:\*\* This will be the longest Author's Note of this fic. Here goes"well, I am using the date/location system of the Halo books. If you find this annoying and unoriginal please tell me. Since backslashes, for some mysterious reason, do not work on FFN, I have to use a different symbol (\_"»). Also, there may be times where elements of this story are pure fiction and from my (insane) imagination, but you can't curse at me for that because the entire Halo storyline is like that as well (those crazy Bungie fanatics, bless 'em). There also will be no explanation of the "Dr. Halsey/Kelly" incident, because that would just make it too confusing and complicated. And yes, I HAVE read all three books extensively. So don't flame me for those reasons, find some others. Then I can just laugh, remember those days when I was a crack-loving fool just like you, and throw your review into the "crap" pile (which is quite large, by the way). Finally, this is just a **\*\*short\*\*** Prologue, most other chapters will range from 2,500 to 4,000 words (these are not set limits, just general guidelines). Just for your information.\_

**\_\*\*Title Note:\*\*** Get used to the boring, stupid chapter names and crappy, unoriginal title; I never was one for spending hours thinking of a good chapter/fic name.\_

**\_\*\*General Note:\*\*** If you haven't played through Halo 2, this may contain plot spoilers. Worse yet, you won't understand anything about the story, so don't read it.\_

**\_\*\*Review Note:\*\*** All reviews will be addressed at the top of the chapter (right here, dumbass) in italics.\_

**\*\*Prologue\*\***

**\*\*2303 hours, February 20, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|**  
**\*\*\*Unidentified Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, holding**  
**position behind Covenant staging point around Mars.\*\***

Spartan-117, or John, the Master Chief, crouched in the bowels of the strange Forerunner ship that contained the last remaining High Prophet of the Covenant, Truth. He had just finished making contact with Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood on board Cairo orbital MAC station. Cairo, nearly three hundred other of her sister orbital MAC stations, and the remains of the UNSC fleet were desperately trying to hold off an overwhelming Covenant attack. Nearly a thousand Covenant warships were making an attempt to wipe out Earth. The Master Chief's unofficial mission was to do what he could do to prevent this from happening, as well as put a stop to whatever twisted plan Truth had cooked up. Naturally, it would be easier going head-to-head with a Covenant cruiser with a Longsword fighter, but the Master Chief had just survived fighting on yet another Halo, and had to gone through experiences with the Flood again, so just getting away from the parasitic monstrosities would be a relief.

The Master Chief hefted a clip of 9.5mm ammunition and was about to slap it into his Battle Rifle when he noticed a splotch of green blood on it. He had scrounged the rifle, ammo, four frag grenades in his grenade bandolier, and the SMGs in his armor's two side holsters from a few dead Combat Forms he killed inside High Charity. It wasn't surprising that all of his equipment was splattered with the drab green blood of the Flood. He suppressed a flicker of revulsion at the memory of his second encounter with the creatures. Still, having the human equipment was worth it, considering he had fought through most of the Covenant Holy City using Covenant merchandise. It felt good to have his hands back on some human weaponry. He slipped the clip of armor-piercing bullets into the receiver and snapped back the weapon's charging handle. The ammo counter on the rifle read full, as did the display on his HUD. Satisfied, the Chief set down his Battle Rifle, loaded up both SMGs and slipped them back into their holsters, then crept towards the door that led to the rest of the ship.

Before he could reach it, though, the door slid open without a sound. Expecting a Brute to come leaping through the opening, the Chief snapped his rifle up to his shoulder and steadied it. The doorway was clear, as was his motion tracker. Even so, the Master Chief's muscles were still tensed; the encounter with the Flood at Delta Halo had rattled him and put him on edge. After Halo Installation 04 had been destroyed, he thought he would never have to deal with the Flood again. He willed himself to calm down, because nervousness when being alone and outnumbered would probably lead to death. The Master Chief mentally chastised himself for not remembering that all Forerunner

doors sensed when life-forms were nearby and opened automatically.

The Spartan peered around the door frame cautiously. There was not a soul in sight, and the hallway was aesthetically empty. It was just a standard Forerunner hallway, lined with a brown rock-like substance that was carved with intricate designs. The Chief stepped into the hallway and moved down it, barely making a sound despite his half-ton of armor and flesh. His boots clinked against the floor panels as he neared the next door. The control panel near the door glowed red; most likely it was locked. He briefly wished Cortana was with him, then shoved aside the thought and looked for an alternate entryway. Seeing none, the Master Chief gathered himself for a charge and rammed the door with his shoulder. The two metal doors bent inwards under the force of the impact. A kick from the Chief's armored boot was sufficient to kick the doors out and send them skittering along the floor. He stepped into the room.

Immediately, a wave of plasma washed across the Master Chief's shields, setting off its audible charge indicator. Quickly, he dived down, picked up one of the bent doors and held it up in front as a shield. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of three Brutes spreading out in a wide formation at the far end of the room. The Chief brought the impromptu shield up, which quickly began to melt away from the high-powered plasma bolts. Within a few seconds, he was forced to throw the molten door away, but his shields were back up. Taking cover behind a purple Covenant crate, he aimed for the nearest Brute's head, and opened fire.

A burst of three armor-piercing Battle Rifle rounds slashed through the Brute's helmet, puncturing the crude metal almost immediately. Three more bursts to the head were enough to put the beast down, as well as splatter the remaining two Brutes with blood and gore. Return fire pelted the exposed part of the Master Chief's body, dropping his shields to half. Ignoring the damage, he fired another set of bursts from his rifle. Another Brute toppled and fell, staining the floor with blood. The plasma rifle it had been carrying flew through the air and came to rest not far from the Chief.

Not wanting to waste any Battle Rifle ammunition, the Chief picked it up and hosed the final Brute with red plasma. This seemed to aggravate the creature more than damage it. The infuriated Brute went berserk with the rage at the death of its comrades and the plasma fire. Ignoring the plasma that continued to fly through the air, the Brute threw down its weapon and charged the Chief with blinding speed. It smashed headlong into the Chief, draining the last of his shields, which had not had a chance to recharge.

The Master Chief had the wind knocked out of him with the force of the blow. Even as he staggered back, he discarded his plasma rifle and drew out his twin SMGs. The Spartan sprayed the Brute with 5mm rounds, his armor's dampening system and his enormous strength easily controlling the large amount of recoil.

The Brute absorbed the bullets like cloth to water and continued to advance. It smacked one of the SMGs out of the Master Chief's hand. He punched the Covenant soldier square in the face; stunning it for a brief moment. The Chief was backing up, still firing, when the magazine clicked dry. He quickly reloaded the one remaining SMG, then began firing again. The Brute was starting up after him when it gave

a howl and crashed to the ground, its furry hide riddled full of bullet holes.

If the Mjolnir battle armor suit didn't have a cooling climate-control layer, the Master Chief was sure he would've been perspiring. More importantly, though, the Chief had burned up two and a half clips of SMG ammo and about half a clip of Battle Rifle ammunition. Checking his ammunition pockets, the Chief realized he only had four Battle Rifle clips and six SMG magazines remaining. If he didn't want to go traipsing around with Covenant-made weapons again, he would have to save ammo-not an easy thing to do under the circumstances.

The Spartan knew he had made a mistake. He should've been expecting Covenant forces on the other side of the door. If he'd thought about that in advance, the Chief probably would've had a frag grenade in hand, and could've killed or badly wounded those Brutes without using any ammo at all.

\_Never think about what you should have done-think about what you plan to do.\_

The words rang clear in the Chief's mind as if he had just heard them yesterday. It was one of the many things Chief Mendez, the primary instructor of the Spartan project, had drilled into the minds of the young Spartans.

The Master Chief let out a long, slow breath and cleared his mind again. \_It doesn't matter what I have to use,\_ he thought. \_I'm going to stop the Covenant on board this ship, no matter what it takes.\_

## 2. Uneasy Alliance

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\_\*\*A/N:\*\* Another long one. Gonna use the UNSC Military Calendar for all the times in this story (even when from the Covenant point of view). Also, I'll just go with the fact that humans seem to be able understand what the Covenant (at least Elites) are saying in the story, and I'll make all the Covenant use minutes, hours, days, etc. instead of "cycles" from Halo: The Flood. This is just because uniformity makes things easier to understand. Also, the human ship is called \_In Amber Clad\_, not just \_Amber Clad\_, and it is overtaken by the Flood-just listen to Cortana's comments during the mission "Gravemind." \_ \_Sorry for all the rather boring dialogue in this chapter; but Halo 2's plot leaves a lot to be desired.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_Oni-Kaiser: thanks for the review.\_

\_pzgr6: thanks for the review, and yeah, Halo 2's ending is bad yet good at the same time.\_

\_Spacefan: Yeah, I have some typos. Need to proofread my work more. Otherwise, thanks for the review.\_

\_red blood white feathers: yep, lots of competition out there. Thanks for the review.\_

## **\*\*Chapter 1: Uneasy Alliance\*\***

**\*\*1823 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Control Room, Delta Halo.\*\***

The Arbiter, Sergeant Avery Johnson, and Commander Miranda Keyes all stood in silence. They were all watching the hovering AI, 343 Guilty Spark, or the Monitor, waiting for an answer. The sounds of the conversation that took place, and the question that just halted it, could still be heard echoing throughout the cavernous Control Room.

\_"Then whereâ€|where would someone go to activate the other rings?\_"

\_"Why, the Ark, of course."\_"

\_"And where, Oracle, is that?"\_"

As the final echoes of the words faded away, the Monitor gave his response.

"I'mâ€|not quite sure, really," he replied. "After countless eons spent searching my own databanks and Halo installation 04'sâ€|I found there were no direct references to the location of the Ark. I suppose the creators hid the information at a secure location, to throw off any enemies they might have had. They wouldn't want their most secret and most important location to be discovered if my databanks, or the Halo installations, fell into the wrong hands."

"What!" Sergeant Johnson exclaimed. "Let me get this straight, Tinkerbell. You're telling us that this "Ark" can activate all these Halos and-"

"Yes, of course, I already mentioned-" the Monitor began.

"Did I ask you to interrupt? No, I thought not. So, you're telling us that this "Ark" thing has the power to activate all the Halos and wipe out all sentient life in the galaxy?" Johnson asked impatiently, one hand fiddling with his Particle Beam rifle's trigger.

"Yes," replied the Monitor.

"And you don't have a clue how to find it?"

"Well, no. Of course you could conduct a search of all former Forerunner planets, as well as all the Halo installations," said the Monitor lightly, as if this task were no harder than taking a walk in the park.

"Oh, that makes it much easier," said Johnson sarcastically.

"Waitâ€|" the Arbiter murmured. "I remember something now. I had forgotten about it in the chaos earlier, with the finding of the Sacred Icon, and the condemnation of the Elites. It took place a few days before I returned from the destruction of a Sacred Ring-Halo 04.

The High Prophets of Regret, Mercy, and Truth were conversing in the Council Chamber of High Charity. I had been ordered to the Chamber to receive my punishment from the Prophets. However, when I approached, they took no notice of me. Rather, they continued their talk about an Ark of some sort. From what I could piece together from their conversation, a Covenant task force had recently run across an abandoned Forerunner planet. On it, they discovered a rock crystal engraved with cryptic runes and symbols. Once deciphered, the symbols seemed to lead to the location of a planet. The runes, once translated, read "The Ark," as far as I know. There was more information on it that I could not glean from the conversation. Also, this crystal was identical to a fragment that was discovered on a different Forerunner planet, many decades ago, before the start of the Human-Covenant war. The partial star chart from that crystal fragment pointed to somewhere within your sector of the galaxy. Other crystals have been found, and they all point to different planets-one of which was your Sigma Octanus IV, I believe, where another crystal was discovered, and that led us to the first Sacred Ring the Covenant had ever found, Halo 04..

"With the discovery of the Ark crystal, the Prophets assembled a large strike force to advance upon this holy shrine. However, the strike force was destroyed by a group of attacking humans, including several Demons-your Spartans. The Prophets also deduced somehow that the Ark was the very homeworld of the humans themselves. The Prophet of Regret also attempted to regain control of the Ark, though he was not expecting the heavy defenses your kind had set up. This information may all explain why the Covenant, or rather the Prophets, harbor such an intense hatred of the humans, and why they have not offered humans induction into the Covenant. They most likely presumed your race to be some sort of interloper upon the holy planets that used to belong to the Forerunners. All other races that made up the Covenant were simply brainwashed by the Prophets into hating the humans and believing in the Great Journey.

"And now, the last Prophet has set out with the entire fleet protecting High Charity to reclaim this Ark. I now know that the Prophets have used the entire Covenant to further their own deluded purposes. In his fervor to claim the Ark, the Prophet of Truth abandoned High Charity to the Flood, instead of fighting for it. We Elites have been detached from the Covenant; many have been killed, and others fought, capturing some enemy ships. The Grunts and Hunters have followed us Elites, because they feel they have been betrayed as well. What we will do now, I do not know. Perhaps we may join the ranks of the humans." Having finished his lengthy explanation, the Arbiter looked sadly about at the shattered bodies of his brethren that lay scattered around the Control Room. Someday, somehow, the Elite would have his revenge.

The two humans stood with mouths slightly agape at the Arbiter's speech, particularly his last proclamation. Johnson closed his mouth and opened it several times, then found his voice.

"You're telling me that Earth is the Ark? And that these Prophets started the whole war? Just because we happened to colonize these planets?" he asked, astonished.

The Arbiter nodded. "As far as I can tell, yes."

"Johnson, Arbiter, we can worry about all of these technicalities

later," Commander Keyes piped up. "Our current situation, if anyone bothered to look at it, is quite grave. The Flood have taken control of the In Amber Clad, and we don't have any other way to get off this Halo. We're going to have to work together if we want to get out of this alive."

"Wait just a minute, ma'am. Have you forgotten that this Elite and others like his kind were trying to kill us just days ago?" Sergeant Johnson said angrily. "We could've retrieved the Index without any trouble if he hadn't been around, but instead he had to knock me out and capture us!"

"Times have truly changed, Sergeant. If the Arbiter and the Elites agree to a cease-fire, then it is settled. You know we can't do this alone, Johnson," Keyes replied.

"We Elites have nowhere else to turn to. We have no other choice. The Covenant no longer respects us as a member, and they have cast asides Grunts and Hunters as well, since they helped us Elites fight against the Brutes, Jackals, and Drones." The Arbiter paused, listening to some radio chatter in his helmet's communications system. "I'm receiving word that a group of Elites, Grunts, and Hunters have regained control of a significant part of High Charity. They are holding out against the Flood in a minor ship bay. Also, the Elite forces fighting on board some ships of High Charity's fleet have captured eighteen ships. I can call for a Phantom to pick us up. Then we can move one the cruisers the Elites have taken over into position and evacuate any other forces on the Holy City."

Sergeant Johnson opened his mouth and snapped it shut. He looked to Commander Keyes.

"Agreed, Arbiter. How will we know to trust you?" she asked. "I know Johnson here has a few problems with this."

"The Elites are an honorable race. We will keep to our promise. Now we hunger for nothing more than vengeance on the Brutes." Here, the Arbiter paused and looked around again at all the bodies of his fellow Elites. "We see now that we have no real reason to hate the humans. You fight far better than almost all of the races that have been absorbed into the Covenant. They would never have been able to hold out for so long. Also, though your technology is primitive, you have shown remarkable skill with it, as well as aptitude for adaptation and improvement of alien technologies."

"Yeah. Should've never messed with the humans!" Sergeant Johnson said proudly, thumping his armor-clad chest. "Now let's get moving!"

"Wait a moment!" Commander Keyes said. "What about the Monitor?"

"He can come with us. His information may prove to be very valuable," the Arbiter answered. "The other Oracle, 2401 Penitent Tangent, can handle the defense of this ring."

"Very well," the Monitor agreed. "This installation has many more security features than the installation I was assigned to. There are mechanical plants scattered all around this ring, capable of autonomously manufacturing Sentinels, Advanced Sentinels, and Enforcers at a very high rate. That should be sufficient to contain

the Flood, especially if the parasite has no suitable hosts around to sustain itself."

"Right," said Keyes. "Then it's settled."

The Arbiter held a conversation with some of his brethren while Johnson and Keyes had a discussion of their own.

"Ma'am, with respect, the Flood is no enemy you should be dealing with. I think I should be the only human to go with these Elites. I've had experience with the Flood, and besides, I don't seem to taste good to them anyway. You should stay behind on one of the Covenant cruisers," the Sergeant said. "Not that I trust these Elites and their cronies, not one bit, but it's safer than you dealing with the Flood."

"Never thought I'd see the day when I would be taking orders from a Sergeant," the Commander said cheerfully.

"It ain't orders, ma'am," Johnson responded. "It's just advice."

Ten minutes later, the small group of one Elite, two humans, and a single floating AI were gathered near the molten remains of the Control Room's doors. The drone of a Phantom could be heard, steadily increasing in volume. The Arbiter's keen gaze picked the purple dropship out, flying towards them through a cloud layer. The Phantom came to a stop, hovering about twenty feet above the group. The odd little group stepped into the dropship's miniature grav lift and were lifted up into the Phantom.

A Grunt riding in the troop bay gave a squeak and leveled his plasma pistol at Sergeant Johnson.

"Look, see, human!" And with that, the diminutive alien let loose two bolts of green plasma at Johnson. The Arbiter's quick reflexes saved the Johnson from a gruesome plasma burn. The Elite stepped in front of the human, letting the shots dissipate harmlessly off his shield. He gritted his mandibles together; the equivalent of a human frown. Apparently, the Elites that had received word of the cease-fire had forgotten to relay the message to the Grunts under their command. The Arbiter gave immediate orders to spread the word of the cease-fire, and told the confused Grunt inside the dropship the message as well. Keyes and Johnson settled down to the form-fitting crash seats, which, in Johnson's mind, was an improvement over their old dropship seats. He had ridden on them before and had some nasty back pain afterwards. The Monitor floated about, inspecting equipment and muttering about how all the technology on board appeared to be stolen from the Forerunners.

The Arbiter made his way to the cockpit. An Elite was sitting at the controls, and he looked up as the Arbiter entered.

"The Arbiter! Alive? I was only told to make a pickup of an Elite and two humans, and that there was a cease-fire!" exclaimed the pilot. "How did you defeat Tartarus and his Brutes? It must have been a battle of the ages!"

"We have time for questions later. Now, though, I need you to make a pickup of my own."



The Phantom twisted its way through the narrow canyons leading up to the Control Room. Suddenly, a platform built into the rock wall became visible. Four large marks in the ground indicated a Scarab had been sitting there. The Arbiter ordered his pilot to put the dropship low to the ground. As the ship descended, a group of Elites ran towards it from the Spectre they had been sitting on. They ran into the lift and were pulled aboard. The Phantom's pilot fed more power to the engines and the dropship began to rise out of the canyon.

The first Elite to come up was a white-armored Elite. He exuded an air of authority and his armor was dented and scarred from countless days of nearly endless fighting. This, truly, was one of the best of the best, his fighting skills comparable to the mighty Arbiter's. He was Rtas 'Vadumee, the Elite Special Operations Commander-for a lack of a better term, an Elite with just as much command authority as the Arbiter himself.

"Ah, my thanks, Arbiter. For I know it is you who would have remembered I was here. I was beginning to think you weren't coming," 'Vadumee said gratefully.

"I am sorry for my late arrival. Stopping Tartarus from activating the ringsâ€|was not an easy task, to say the least," said the Arbiter in a supreme understatement.

'Vadumee snorted. "That damned Brute and his followers. I suppose you had to dispose of him?"

"Yes, and I had some help from these two humans." The Arbiter gestured towards Keyes and Johnson.

'Vadumee glanced at the humans and nodded. The Arbiter was just about to yell for the pilot to take them up when he picked up a faint wash of static on his communications system. The Sergeant and Keyes cocked their heads, listening intently through their own earpieces. However, all they heard was static.

"Maybe the Phantom's communications device will have more success. It is more powerful than our personal units," the Arbiter suggested. They moved into the cockpit, where the pilot was trying to tune in to the signal.

"It's on one of the human frequencies," the pilot said, pointing to a holographic display showing a series of lines. "Waitâ€|I've got it." The message came in through the Phantom's cockpit speakers.

\_"â€|are any UNSC personnel receiving this message? I repeat, this is Warrant Officer Michael Ross, Pelican dropship Alpha 279, Alpha 2-7-9, of \_In Amber Clad\_â€|is anyone out there? Godâ€|they've all been taken by the Flood! No one's left but us!"\_

"Alpha 279!" Keyes yelled into the cockpit voice receiver. "This is Commander Miranda Keyes! Do you read me?"

\_"Commander? It is really you? Thank God we found you. The Flood, they've taken over the whole \_In Amber Clad\_, they took everyone! We are all that's left! I-"\_

Keyes cut him off impatiently. "We know of all this, Ross. Do you see the Phantom in the sky? Don't worry, it's friendly. We'll land in the

platform extended out of the canyon wall. Yes, the one that has Brute bodies strewn on it."

The two dropships touched down on the platform a few moments later. Keyes, Johnson, and the Arbiter jumped down through the Phantom's miniature grav lift to greet the Pelican's occupants. The Pelican's hatch hissed open, and a squad of ten Helljumpers jumped out, armed with Battle Rifles. Johnson nodded to one who seemed to be in charge of the group, though there were no NCOs or officers around. The Helljumpers saluted Keyes and took off their helmets, looking around warily, not lowering their rifles.

"What is this?" asked the lead Helljumper suspiciously. "With respect, what are you doing running around with the Covenant, Commander?"

"It's all right, Private Grant," said Keyes, who obviously knew some of the Marines on her own ship. "They're not Covenant anymore. To make a long story short, the Elites have been kicked out of the Covenant, taking the Grunts and Hunters with them. We've formed a cease-fire with them. This is the Arbiter-which is pretty much their equivalent to the Master Chief."

Still, the Marine did not lower his weapon. "How do I know you haven't been brainwashed?"

Johnson stepped up. "Listen, boy, there ain't nobody who can brainwash Sergeant Avery J. Johnson. And if you don't believe me, that's fine with us. You can just stay here on Halo until you starve to death, or until the Flood get you."

Private Grant contemplated this for a second, then laughed and slung his Battle Rifle over his shoulder.

"Well, if you put it that way, it doesn't seem like there's much of a choice, is there?" said Grant. Commander Keyes was explaining the situation to him when Johnson noticed something. The Helljumpers were all wearing armor that was noticeably different from their usual gear. The plates were thicker and the suit was more complete. There were luminous slits positioned around the armor's surface. In fact, it looked more like a Spartan's Mjolnir armor than anything else.

"Hey, Grant, what's that armor you and your Marines are wearing?" he asked. "Doesn't look like the standard issue to me."

"Oh, that," said the Helljumper offhandedly. "It's the new Trident Mark I prototype armor system. It was modeled on the Mjolnir armor for Spartans, but obviously some parts had to be scaled down. The Trident contains the same reactive strength-enhancing metal liquid crystal as the Mjolnir. The developers put as much in as they could without having the suit shatter the user's bones. Also, it has a shielding system, though it is slightly weaker than the Mjolnir's shields. The suit's armor plating is all made of a new type of metal that's extremely resilient, though I'm not sure what it is exactly. I've also heard something about some scientists developing performance-enhancing biochemical treatments that can be applied to the regular Marine. Who knows, maybe we'll all become weaker versions of Spartans. You'll have to ask those eggheads back home. By the way, we have an extra suit stowed away on the Pelican. I don't know you

well, but I think you'd like to try it out."

"You took the words right outta my mouth," said Johnson with a slight smile. "I don't think the Commander here has told you yet, but we're taking a little trip on to the High Charity. The Flood aren't going to be exactly happy about this, so we need every soldier we get. Want to come with?"

A muscle tightened in the Helljumper's face. "Hell yes, Johnson, you bet we do. Those damn Flood things took all of our buddies and everyone else aboard the In Amber Clad. We want revenge, and we don't care if it means working with these Elites."

"Good. Now, be a gentleman and give me that extra Trident suit, will you?"

A few minutes later, the Helljumpers got back on board their Pelican and lifted off. The Phantom followed suit. On board the Phantom, Sergeant Johnson was excitedly trying out the Trident suit.

"Yeah, I am liking this new armor!" he crowed ecstatically. "Those Flood had better watch out, because Sergeant Johnson is even badder than before!"

He could find no way to charge the suit's shields, however, as the immense power needed to start the system up couldn't be supplied by the Trident's fusion pack. Luckily, the Phantom had a shield charging station for Elites. The Arbiter suggested he use it, and luckily it worked.

Before long, the two dropships had exited Delta Halo's atmosphere and were making their approach run on the High Charity. The Arbiter guided the pilot to the ship bay that the Elites and their comrades had captured. He also assured the Elites and their forces that the two incoming dropships were not filled with bloodthirsty Flood Combat Forms. The Pelican and Phantom flew into the ship bay and dropped their troops. Before leaving, the Pelican's pilot used his 70mm chin gun and Anvil-II rockets to decimate a large group of Combat Forms. The Phantom's pilot also raked the Flood with his three plasma cannons. Then both ships departed for a nearby cruiser that the Elites had captured.

Johnson and the ten Helljumpers turned on the high-intensity flashlights on their suits. The Flood infestation of the High Charity had filled the entire holy city with a disgusting greenish haze, and most of the lights were out. Johnson was securing an area with his team when he noticed a strange pedestal in front of the door. He started to approach it when the purple image of a female AI appeared on it.

"Johnson. It's been quite a eventful day, don't you think?"

### 3. Liberator

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\*\*A/N: \*\*I'm not sure which weapon names to capitalize. For now I'm only going to capitalize the names of the Battle Rifle, Covenant Carbine, SMG, Needler, Particle Beam Rifle, Brute Shot, and Fuel Rod

Gun. Also, I won't use the "official" Covenant names for their races (ex. Sangheili, Jiralhanae, etc.), for my own reasons. If you have any comments about this don't hesitate to bring it up in a review. Sorry that this chapter is kinda short, but I wanted to get it out to you guys.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_pzgr6: I did notice how some of the military tech in Halo/Halo 2 is slightly off. Also, I looked at a Pelican in a ship bay on the level "Cairo Station," and the autocannon's caliber seemed quite small. Well, I'll keep it at 70mm for now, but I'm going to create modified versions of all the UNSC technology. Whoops, did I just say that?\_

\_DAvid Chen: Excuse me for my lengthy descriptions. If you don't like 'em, don't read 'em. Well, not really, but the point is, what really is out of character? You don't learn much from Halo 2 (which is why I had the whole description anyway), so I can make them as I see fit. Just because you're a Commander doesn't mean you can't say "kicked out." The problem with letting readers fill in their own gaps is that they might get confused if their version doesn't match up with info in later chapters. In any future chapters, if there's lengthy descriptions/dialogue in it without any action, I'll be sure to put the "DON'T READ IF YOU'RE EASILY BORED" sticker on top. Seriously. I will. And I kind of did on Chapter 1. Well, I hope that clears that up. Anyway, thanks for the review.\_

\_NuclearMage: Hey, thanks for the theory. I had a theory that was pretty much the same as yours. Makes you wonder if that's what Bungie wants us to think, who knows? Also, I was planning to fit ideas like those in my story before you reviewed, but thanks anyway for the help!\_

\_Spacefan, Crystopher, EnoshStar, rjectkd89, angelicdhampir2004, Inquisitor Arnolis, Raptor - X1: thanks for the support. If only I had more like you.\_

**\*\*Chapter 2: Liberator\*\***

**\*\*2337 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
\*\*\*Unidentified Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, holding  
position behind Covenant staging point around Mars.\*\***

The Master Chief paused to reload his weapons after clearing out a room full of Jackals. To conserve ammo he had thrown all four of his frag grenades, which, aside from killing some Jackals, gave the walls and floor a repainting. After putting down the last few Jackals with a few bursts of Battle Rifle fire, he restocked all eight of his grenade pouches with Covenant plasma grenades. Unfortunately, he was down to his last clips for his Battle Rifle and SMGs.

The Chief was slightly disturbed by the fact that there was no serious opposition. Aside from the first encounter with hostiles on board the ship, he had not fought a single Brute. He guessed that the lower-ranking soldiers were put in front as meat shields, and that most of the Brutes were being kept in reserve, or being used for important tasks. Having to deal with masses of Brutes wasn't a very comforting idea, so he hoped that this assumption was wrong.

He shrugged, slapped his last clip of Battle Rifle ammo into his weapon, and moved closer to the door that led into the next room. His job was never easy.

The chambers on board the Forerunner ship were somewhat similar to the chambers on Halo 04. In the Master Chief's terms, the layout had no obvious purpose whatsoever. It didn't matter much to him; the random objects scattered around the rooms offered plenty of cover in combat.

The Master Chief took cover behind one such object and threw a primed plasma grenade near the door. The thin door peeled backwards from the force of the blast, and the Chief brought his Battle Rifle up.

The room that the door led into was unlike any of the others. All the surfaces of it were constructed a strange, clear material, which allowed a clear view into space-and the battle taking place above Earth. The material seemed to be exceptionally strong, because crates were stacked on it and holographic display systems were mounted everywhere.

More importantly, a large group of Brutes and Jackals had been in the room monitoring equipment. It appeared that either the Chief was getting closer to the Prophet, or he was just wrong that the Brutes were in reserve. Right now, he didn't really care about that. As the grenade blew the door open, the Covenant soldiers turned towards the Chief, weapons at the ready.

The Spartan ducked behind his cover and heard plasma bolts sizzling through the air. There was the unmistakable noise of several Covenant Carbines, as well. That would be a problem; his rifle's range and accuracy advantage over the usual plasma rifles was gone. However, the Brutes were not exactly great shots, not nearly as good as their eagle-eyed Elite predecessors, and the Carbines could come in handy because he was almost out of Battle Rifle ammo.

The Chief edged himself from his cover, just far enough so that he could fire. He targeted the three Jackals first, as it would be easier to tackle the Brutes without the pesky shield-carriers around. Sighting through the rifle's 2x scope, he aimed at the first Jackal's shield notch.

The Master Chief squeezed his Battle Rifle's trigger and blew the Jackal's hand off. Blood spewed out onto the other Jackals, who threw up their shields over their heads and tried to run for cover behind the Brutes.

\_A foolish decision,\_ the Master Chief thought with a slight smile. He shot the two Jackals in their backs, and they slumped to the ground. Even as plasma rifle and Carbine fire peppered his shields and the area around him, the Chief steadied his aim on the head of one Brute and fired three bursts, killing the creature. As it howled a death cry and crashed to the floor, he threw himself from cover, throwing three plasma grenades at the remaining cluster of Brutes.

Blue-white detonations momentarily obscured the Brutes from sight. When the brightness faded, only three were left alive. The Spartan dispatched one with the last eighteen rounds in his Battle Rifle's magazine, then discarded the empty weapon. The last Brute,

predictably, dropped his Carbine and charged the Chief. The Spartan had already drawn his two SMGs and was hosing the Brute with gunfire.

The Brute must've been wounded by the plasma grenades, or the Chief got in a lucky shot, because after using about half of each SMG clip, the Brute fell over, dead. He threw away the nearly-empty SMGs and picked up a Covenant Carbine. He checked the indicator bar on the weapon: the current clip was about half full. Confident that he could scrounge more ammo off of the dead Brutes in the next room, he gingerly stepped into it. When he was sure the glass-like material would hold his weight, he strode in.

Crates full of Covenant weapons and equipment were open all around the room. The Chief, luckily, had hit the jackpot. He refilled his grenade bandolier, clipped two Needlers to his armor's side weapon holster/clip systems, and filled his ammunition pockets with both Carbine and Needler ammo.

Before moving out, the Spartan could not help but glance out through the clear material for a moment, watching the battle for Earth. A flash caused his armor's visor to darken as a nearby Covenant cruiser launched its plasma torpedoes. Seconds later, its shields blazed solid silver and the ship shattered into fragments as a Super MAC round hit it. A smaller Covenant ship, presumably a destroyer, was hit by several ship-launched MAC rounds and a flurry of Archer missiles. The ship listed heavily, its frame torn apart. It appeared the humans, for once, were taking far fewer losses, because their three hundred orbital Super MAC stations had enormous range and power. However, the Covenant had a large numerical advantage, and were beginning to take out a few human ships and MAC stations.

Shaking his head, and now fully decked out with Covenant equipment, the Chief approached yet another door, not remembering that it was likely to be locked. Surprisingly, the door slid open as he neared it. The reward for his momentary carelessness was a barrage of fire from the Covenant forces stationed in the next room, who seemed to have purposely unlocked the door. He beat a hasty retreat behind a crate threw a few grenades to cover his retreat, which shredded a few Jackals who could not jump away in time.

Two times in one day, he thought angrily, as grenade detonations once again shook the floor. Is this déjà vu or what? Some day I've been having, huh? As an enemy plasma grenade sailed by and nearly stuck to his armor, he immediately resolved to keep any self-chastisement until after his mission was complete. The Chief threw the crate down on the grenade and rolled away heads-over-tails, saving himself from a bloody death.

Four Carbine shots hit the Chief's shields, bringing them down to half charge. He returned fire with a barrage from his own Carbine. He targeted one Brute after another, aiming for their heads. A Brute's helmet was blown clean off with a hole through it, and it rolled along with floor with a large splotch of blood on it. Two more Brutes were dropped by the Chief's impeccable aim before he was forced to reload.

The Brutes, sensing the momentary lapse of fire, threw several grenades and opened fire in a spray of plasma blasts and Carbine

projectiles. A white object flashed past the Chief's visor and detonated several feet away, rattling his teeth and wiping out another third of his shield bar. The low charge warning went off again, beeping in a high pitched tone. Before he could find some cover, two more Carbine shots hit his shield, and the warning indicator's beeping became lower and more persistent, indicating it was completely drained.

It was the Brutes' own plasma grenades that saved him, however. The grenades, which were thrown too far away to damage him, blinded the Brutes instead. The Chief grabbed some large metal object, placed it in front of him as a barrier, and drew out both his Needlers, firing through the blue flash of plasma grenades.

The Master Chief heard screams and howls as the heat-seeking needles found targets and detonated. Blood, fur and viscera flew everywhere as the Brutes were torn apart in a flurry of explosions. By the time the Needlers' clips were exhausted, all the Brutes were dead. He picked off a few remaining Jackals with well-placed Carbine shots, then doubled back to the weapons crates to restock both his Needler and Carbine ammunition stocks, reload both his weapons, and fill up on plasma grenades.

Stepping over the mutilated bodies of the Brutes and Jackals, the Chief entered the next room. It seemed to be an improvised detention block, with six rooms. An energy wall projector was in front of each room, effectively transforming the chambers into holding cells. What was most interesting to the Master Chief, however, was that the cells were occupied.

Twelve Grunts, four Elites, and a pair of Hunters were standing behind the walls of energy that sealed the rooms off. They were peering through the translucent energy, and looked just as shocked, if not more shocked, as the Master Chief himself. All of the Grunts and Elites had the silver-gray armor of the Spec Ops division.

"A Demon? Here?" said an Elite in wonder. "What in the name of the Gods is going on?" The others that used to be part of the Covenant gave similar cries of amazement.

"Listen, Demon," growled another Elite in a deep voice, who was alone in his cell. "I'll make a deal with you. \_We'll\_ make a deal with you."

The Chief was taken aback by this offer, but quickly recovered his composure. "What sort of deal?"

"We-that is, the Elites, Grunts, and Hunters-will ally ourselves with you to fight these Brutes and their comrades," said the Elite simply, clicking his mandibles for effect.

"And why," retorted the Chief, "should I trust you for a second? I've spent most of my military career kill you Covenant and watching you destroy my race."

"The tables have turned, Demon," replied the Elite. "We are no longer Covenant. Free us, and we shall fight by your side."

"Right," said the Chief sarcastically. "I suppose I'll be in front, right? So you can stab me in the back?"

"Do not jest, Demon," growled the Elite. "Time is short. It is only a matter of time before the Covenant launch dropships to take the planet. The Grand Fleet is mainly a diversion-even the Fleet can not stand up against so many of your orbital defense platforms. However, you can not imagine how many ground troops the Prophet of Truth has at his disposal. We must stop the Prophet before he can carry out whatever plans he has for your planet. The Elites, as well as the Grunts and Hunters, need their revenge. I, Cura 'Canarmee, will personally lead this group."

The Chief hesitated, then grudgingly said, "Fine. But you're going in front."

The Elite nodded.

And so, the Master Chief shot the energy wall projector that was holding the alien soldier in. Half expecting 'Canarmee to charge and attack him, the Chief raised his Carbine, ready to fire.

The Elite seemed to be smiling with its four mandibles as it stared back defiantly. "You do not take an Elite on his word?"

"I could listen to your words all day, and that wouldn't make me trust you any more than I do the Brutes."

'Canarmee walked over to a Brute's body and picked up a fallen Covenant Carbine. The Chief sprang into a crouch, his finger almost pulling the trigger back.

The Elite was still smiling.

#### 4. High Charity

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\_\*\*A/N: \*\***Going to capitalize all weapon names and soldier ranks (ex. Minor). Also, all Elites, etc. will no longer be "it," they will be "he/she." Forgot to mention this in the first A/N, also-**\*\*Anybody** who copies or plagiarizes any part of my story will be prosecuted to the maximum legal extent. If I can't really do anything to you legally (which is more than likely), I'll just flame you and report you, unless it was an honest coincidence.**\*\*\_**

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

**\_Klitchko:** Well, I must say, you are persistent. I can (partly) understand why you might think the chapter was rushed, because it was rather short (I mentioned that in the A/N). But I don't want it to drag the chapter on too long, and I need to end with something suspenseful, or else nobody would come back. Also, I strongly disagree with your "out of character" statements. Many people have the illusion of the "Master Chiefmindless killing machine" equation, which, sadly, was created by Eric Nylund's stories. Though I have the utmost respect for a writer who is clearly way above my level, I don't like his portrayal of the Master Chief. Nobody can be that inhuman-even if you are trained to be a soldier from childhood. Also, it would be boring for my story-basically, all he would do is walk around and kill stuff. I like William Dietz's version of the Chief



much better (I recommend that you read Halo: The Flood), because it gives him feelings, emotions (particularly fear of the Flood and sarcasm/annoyance at 343 Guilty Spark), and basically, a more human-like character. The Master Chief is serious, and a man of few words, but not so much that he can't give a response to an Elite. He, in my mind, is NOT a robot. Not even close. If anyone disagrees with this, that's good for you. Whoever does so can go read some other story, but don't try to change this particular opinion of mine. If anyone flames me I'll just leave your flame there as an example of public stupidity (not saying this review is a flame). Finally, I really need dialogue to expand the plot. A story with all action and little to know dialogue would be a worthless waste of time. Not saying that you can't voice your thoughts, butâ€|\_

\_Terrin Nyphon\_ Yeah, I think I will split the paragraphs and re-post the chapter. It didn't look that big of a paragraph in MS Word. Good advice.\_

\_NuclearMage\_ Sorry, don't do romance. I suck at it (unless I get help). More Marines, ODSTs/Helljumpers (my favorite Marines), and space battles coming. Just waitâ€|and keep reviewing! Also, if I ever need some crazy name, I'll ask you. Thanks for the offer.\_

\_halo marinel\_ If you read the passage again you will notice that it says "\*\*\*nearly\*\* stuck to his armor," so it's not exactly on his armor, just nearby on the ground. Other than that, thanks for the review. By the way, no prob about reviewing Halo: SG-1 for you. Always happy to help reviewers.\_

\_Everyone else\_ : thanks for the (continued) support! Don't worry, it's not that you don't matter, I'm not putting up all your names because A. I am too lazy and B. it would take too long (see A). Keep reviewing! Thanks!\_

**\*\*Chapter 3: High Charity\*\***

**\*\*2009 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
\*\*\*Unidentified Ship Bay, Covenant Holy City "High Charity," Sanctum  
of the Hierarchs.\*\***

"Cortana? What are you doing here? I thought you went back to Earth with the Chief!" Sergeant Avery Johnson exclaimed. He was staring in amazement at the AI's figure, which was emanating from an alien hologram projection pedestal.

"It's a long story, Sergeant. Care to hear it later? We really don't have time for it right now," Cortana said, brushing off the question.

"Don't have time for itâ€|" the Sergeant snorted. "Got that right. You don't know how many times I've heard that today. Looks like we'll have a couple hours of story time whenever we get some time off."

"Fine, Sergeant, I'll tell you as much as I can for now. To make a long story short, Truth left on a Forerunner ship that seemed to be docked inside the High Charity and connected to its power grid, who knows for how long. Anyway, the Master Chief got onboard, and Truth made a jump to Earth, judging by the path he took, and took most of the Covenant fleet with him. Meanwhile, I was trying to detonate \_In

Amber Clad\_'s reactor to wipe out the Flood here, butâ€|it doesn't seem to be working. My guess is that the Flood have dismantled the reactor, or that they have mangled the ship so badly that I can't communicate with it at all.

"Also Gravemind, the huge creature that seems to control the Flood, attempted to interrogate me. He seemed very interested about the coordinates of other human and Covenant planets. Obviously, he wants to gather enough hosts for his Infection Forms and spread throughout the galaxy. Of course, I fed him a bunch of false information. Still, it is a cause for concern. We have enough on our hands with fighting the Covenant."

"So, how can we get you out of the system? Where's your data chip?" Johnson demanded worriedly, apparently disregarding Cortana's statement about Gravemind.

"Wellâ€|it's a long way off from here, and the whole area is infested with Flood. You and your newfound allies, it seems, wouldn't have a chance of reaching it. There is, however, a Covenant data crystal inserted into this very hologram projector. By my readings, it's completely empty and devoid of any harmful coding, and my readings are rarely wrong," Cortana said with a hint of pride.

"So you're sayingâ€|" Johnson started.

"That I can dump myself onto the chip through the High Charity's data network, and you can take me out," Cortana finished.

"What about the High Charity? And that Gravemind thing and his Flood?"

"The station seems to be low on power. There's obviously no possible way it could make a Slipspace jump on such low power. Even if they took \_In Amber Clad\_'s reactor and plugged it into the power grid, they still wouldn't have any amount of power close enough to power those massive Slipspace generators. We can deal with them after we save Earth. So yank me already."

"Are you sure about this, ma'am?" Sergeant Johnson asked.

"Well, you could always leave me here, or fight through waves of Flood to get to my real chip. Seems like a real hard choice, doesn't it? The chip's in the slot right under the top of the projector."

The Sergeant reached a hand out towards the data chip, then stopped. "How will I get you out of here safely?"

Cortana sighed, exasperated. "What's with all the questions? And I thought you were a smart Marine. I know the new Trident prototype suit doesn't have an AI-interface layer, at least not yet, but you have several secure pockets, right? I'll be okay with riding in one of those."

Johnson opened his mouth again, then closed it again and nodded. Cortana's image disappeared from the projector as she transferred herself onto the chip. A few seconds later, the Sergeant yanked the cube-shaped data crystal out and put it in one of his empty grenade pockets. He made sure that the pocket was secure, then returned to

his squad. No Flood creatures had attacked during his absence, which worried him. What could the parasites be planning?

The Sergeant made ready his Battle Rifle and the two Magnums in his armor's twin secondary weapons holsters/clips. He had acquired the weapons, four frag grenades, eight clips for the Battle Rifle, and sixteen magazines for the Magnums from Pelican Alpha 279's miniature armory. Now, he stood with the rest of his team, gripping their weapons tightly with gloved hands.

Sergeant Johnson saw a flicker of red in the top corner of the motion tracker in his suit's HUD. It was a welcome feature to him, as was the reticule, ammunition indicators, and all the other features that the Trident suit had. He waved a quick warning signal to his group before he realized that they had motion trackers, too, and probably knew that something was approaching. His suit's flashlight panned over the Helljumpers, who were grouped together for safety. The golden comet insignia that was painted on their suits' shoulder armor plates flashed eerily in the beam of light. One of the Helljumpers had a red cross in their insignia-obviously that of a medic.

Johnson crouched down and swept the general area with rifle and flashlight. The contact on his motion tracker seemed to be coming from behind a door. The ODSs followed his example, crouching down to make themselves smaller targets. Four Elites, all clad with the red armor of Majors and Veterans, came over to them. The Sergeant suppressed a sudden urge to shoot the former Covenant soldiers. He nodded towards them, and they nodded back.

"You have also picked up the disturbance?" asked one Elite in a deep voice.

"Yep. It's coming from behind that door," the Sergeant replied, gesturing towards the darkened doorway. "By the way, why is power out in this place, anyway? We could do with some more lights."

"When the Prophet of Truth left his place, he took the Forerunner ship that powered this station with him. That ship's reactors, built with the wondrous technology of the Forerunners, was the main power source of this place. The backup reactors cannot supply enough power to light all of the station."

"That's just great," Johnson grunted. "Good thing we have flashlights."

"Also, we should set all our communications systems to the same channel," continued the Elite, as if he had not heard the human. "Since your armor suits seem to be more adaptable, you should set your systems to our channel, which I presume that you already know from monitoring our information networks."

"Yeah, you bet we do. We aren't stupid enough to disregard enemy intel," said the Sergeant, as he and his men adjusted their COM channels. However, their motion trackers still registered the Elites, Grunts, and Hunters as enemies, since they did not have the neural friend-or-foe chip implants that all UNSC soldiers had. They would have to be careful when relying on their motion trackers.

The Elite nodded and trained both of his Needlers on the door. A few more Elites and two Hunters also made their way to where the Flood

were expected to attack. The Sergeant didn't see many Grunts, and he guessed that most of them had been killed by the Flood. Johnson decided to pull his soldiers back and let the two massive Hunters take the assault on their shields and armor. He didn't want to lose any of his squad so early in the battle.

While guarding another door, Spec Ops Commander 'Vadumee walked up to the Arbiter. The former servant of the Prophets was looking at the Elites, Grunts, Hunters, and Helljumpers scattered around the ship bay, and seemed to be deep in thought.

"What troubles you, Arbiter?" 'Vadumee inquired, worried.

"Nothing, 'Vadumee," the Arbiter said, preoccupied. "It's just thatâ€|our alliance needs a name. The Covenant will need a name to fear as we have our revenge on those treacherous Prophets and the fools who follow them."

"Then we shall be just that: the Alliance," replied the Commander simply.

"The Allianceâ€|Short and simple, just the way I like it," \_Sergeant Johnson's voice blared through the two Elites' communications headsets. \_"Not something that makes no sense whatsoever and can't be pronounced without having tongue surgery, like your 'Uneven Elephant' station that the Chief and his boys had the pleasure of blowing up." \_

The Elites made no reply and instead made preparations for the oncoming Flood assault.

Suddenly, a loud \_clang\_ reverberated around the ship bay, like a gong. The Sergeant whipped around to face the door he was guarding. As his flashlight lit the door, he saw that there was long dent in it. Several more dents appeared as the watched, and the doors were soon whacked out of position.

Flood Combat Forms poured into the room. The Elites and ODSTs opened fire. Plasma, needles, Carbine rounds, and Battle Rifle shots cut through the first wave of beasts before they could move two paces. Hunters crushed Flood with their huge shields and disintegrated them with Fuel Rod Guns. Johnson fired his Battle Rifle as fast as it would let him. His armor's recoil absorption system took most of the recoil, but he still felt the weapon jump against his shoulder every time he fired.

Combat Forms ran into the ship bay and were killed almost immediately. Many of the mindless parasites didn't even get to fire their weapons before they were demolished by the Alliance soldiers. The Flood were true to their name and kept coming. Before long, however, Needlers, Carbines, and Battle Rifles needed to be reloaded, and Plasma Rifles started to overheat.

The Elites with swords and four Helljumpers wielding Shotguns stepped up. The Hunters remained in the fray, continuing to wipe out whole groups of Flood with their weapons. Swords cut Combat Forms into dust, and Shotgun blasts hit with so much force that the Flood creatures were literally blown to pieces by the cones of eight-gauge buckshot.

Not a single one of the Alliance soldiers had fallen, but the Flood were, as always, persistent. One of the Elite's Energy Swords ran out of energy and collapsed, and an ODST had to back out to reload his Shotgun. Yellow shields of the Helljumpers' suits and silvery shields of the Elites' armor flared as the Flood fired their weapons blindly.

An ODST's shield was brought down by sustained enemy fire, and his suit was hit by several Carbine shots. One of the rounds penetrated the suit's side, which had lighter armor for flexibility. He grunted in pain and stumbled back, still firing his Shotgun to hold off the Flood. The Helljumper squad's medic was hanging back behind the bulk of the Alliance troops with a Battle Rifle and twin SMGs when he spotted the ODST backing away from the fight, clutching his side. The medic ran up, dragged the Marine behind a stack of scrap metal, and pulled out a medpack.

The first group of Alliance troops, including Johnson, took over the fighting again as the second group reloaded or grabbed fresh swords. The Sergeant fired a single burst into a Combat Form's chest, from which a cluster of tentacles protruded. The Flood form dropped in a shower of greenish blood. Surprised, he targeted another in the same spot and squeezed his Battle Rifle's trigger. The beast also dropped to the ground, lifeless.

"Listen up, meatheads! Yes, that includes you Elites. The Combat Forms seem weaker when you hit them where their Infection Forms are living, which is in the chest of their host. That means that if you hit them where a group of tentacles are sprouting out in the center of their chests, they will die quicker. Got that?"

There was a murmur of assent. The Alliance continued to pound the Flood with every weapon in their arsenal, and the parasites continued to drop faster than ever. The Sergeant was hit by a volley of SMG rounds and a group of needles, which dropped his shield to half. He ducked behind a pillar to let it recharge, because he couldn't risk anything with the Flood around.

When he emerged from his cover, a few last Combat Forms ran into the room. Johnson dispatched them with the help of the Arbiter, who held a Carbine. The Arbiter had been guarding another door when he saw the action near Johnson's door. Both the Marine and the Elite aimed carefully, killing the Combat Forms with a few shots or bursts to the Infection Forms that controlled them.

There were no more Flood beasts running through the opening, which was completely covered in pale green blood. His motion tracker was also clear. The Sergeant took advantage of this lull in the fighting to refill his primary ammo pockets with Battle Rifle clips. He took the ammunition off of the body of an ex-human security officer of the In Amber Clad. He tried not to look at the limp Infection Form in the officer's chest as he reloaded his weapons.

After helping the ODSTs and Elites push a barricade in position, the Sergeant put his Battle Rifle in the primary weapon holster/clip on the back of his armor and drew out both his Magnums. He went around and shot each dead Combat Form's chest to make sure no Infection Form could come and bring the bodies back to life. The 12.7mm HE rounds blew large holes in the former Elite and human chests and stained the muzzle of his pistols with blood.

Later, after his grisly task was complete, the Sergeant took a body count. Only one Elite, a Minor, had been killed. Judging by the Shotgun laying next to his corpse, the Elite had been killed when a Flood form rushed up and fired the weapon at point-blank range, penetrating the Elite's shields and armor. Johnson didn't feel too sorry for the alien, as he had spent most of his adult life fighting the Covenant. However, the Alliance would need every soldier they could get to hold back the rushing Flood.

Most of the Alliance soldiers seemed content with their victory over the Flood. However, the Arbiter, who had been guarding a different door, seemed to have other thoughts on his mind. Sergeant Johnson noticed the strange expression on Spec Ops Commander 'Vadumee's face, though he couldn't tell if the expression was caused by confusion, pain, anger, or sorrow.

"Somethin' on your mind?" Johnson asked, walking up to the Commander.

"Noâ€¦well, yes. I have encountered the Flood before, and the parasite was an incredibly formidable foe. Now it seems that they are too easy to defeat, and that they give up too easily. Perhaps they are planning something."

"Don't worry about it. We whipped them good this time because there was a large group of us, and they were coming through a pretty small door. Also," Johnson said, jerking his head towards the Hunters, "We got those walking tanks right there. Combined with my top-notch ODSs, which are our special elite division, there's no reason we shouldn't win. Besides, evac's on the way. One of your cruisers is already moving into position." Having said his piece, Johnson walked off to the group of ODSs who were lounging about in a corner.

'Vadumee looked out through the two translucent energy walls that sealed off the ship bay from space and saw that the human was right. A sleek, silver cruiser was moving into position near the High Charity, shining brightly as its surface reflected light from the system's sun. A few dots, presumably Phantoms, were coming out of a tiny slit in the cruiser's side. Even so, the Commander could not contain a strong feeling of foreboding. Would the dropships arrive in time to save the group from another Flood attack?

As if to answer his question, there was a series of thunderous explosions that broke through a large blast door in the center of the room. Quickly, the Arbiter and a group of ten Major Elites that he was leading raced to cover the door. Johnson, who had been ordering his squad of Helljumpers to refill their ammunition pockets, also came running. The Spec Ops Commander pulled his Energy Sword out of its sheath, activated it, and hurried towards the group of Alliance soldiers pointing weapons at the empty doorway.

Hundreds of Infection Forms skittered along through the broken blast doors, searching for targets. They paused as the squads of the Arbiter and Sergeant Johnson neared the wrecked doors. All of a sudden, as if somebody had flipped a switch, the Infection Forms surged as one giant wave towards the Elites and Marines.

The Sergeant gathered his breath and bellowed his famous command over

the COM channel: "Let 'em have it!" The Elites and ODSs opened fire without hesitation. Johnson and the Arbiter stood side by side, ripping through multiple forms with their weapons. An ODS who had picked up two SMGs sprayed the podlike creatures with bullets. The hapless group of Infection Forms was decimated in less than a minute.

The Arbiter paused and wondered why only Infection Forms were attacking. He surmised that the forms had been spewed out from exploding Carrier Forms, which had been used by the Flood to knock down the blast doors. Judging by the large amount of Infection Forms that attacked, there had to be many Carrier Forms. That was understandable, because the blast doors were rather thick.

His thoughts were cut off as a fresh wave of Flood entered the room. This time they were Combat Forms. The Arbiter snapped up his Carbine and fired several shots at the lead Combat Form. The green projectiles flew straight and true, but were absorbed by a silver barrier that appeared in front of the former Elite.

"They've got shields!" yelled the Arbiter. Some of the Elites, who had not dealt with shielded Combat Forms before, backed up as the Flood ran towards them. A Helljumper looked as though he was about to do it same, before Johnson stopped him.

"Get back here, soldier! Did I say you could turn tail and run home like a Grunt? No, I think not. Let me show you how it's done." With that, the Sergeant holstered his Battle Rifle, taking out both his Magnums. He aimed the Magnums at a charging Combat Form and fired repeatedly. Seven bullets hit the form's shield, overloading it, and three more to the chest put the whole creature down for good.

"See? Their shields are weaker than the regular Elite shields. They're not much harder to kill than a regular Combat Form," yelled Johnson as he pumped another one of the loathsome creatures full of Magnum rounds. The other Elites and Helljumpers were given confidence by the Sergeant and Arbiter, who were both killing Flood forms left and right, and by 'Vadumee, who cut all kinds of Flood forms into pieces with one powerful slash of his sword.

A trio of Elites worked together, all of them dual-wielding Needlers. They would fill Combat Forms with explosive needles, and the Combat Form would detonate in a cloud of green dust, whether the forms were shielded or not.

Four Helljumpers who had dual SMGs were back to back, rotating in a wheel of death. They blew off the appendages of Combat Forms and filled their bodies with so many 5mm rounds that they came apart. While one of them reloaded, the other three moved around in a triangle formation to cover him. The group moved through groups of Flood, leaving only dead bodies in their wake.

Two Elites with Carbines had their backs to the door, peppering some Combat Forms with radioactive projectiles, when a fresh wave of the creatures leapt in. The Combat Forms whacked the Elites with their Flood-enhanced strength, breaking the spines of the two unfortunate Elites. Both of the Minors crumpled to the ground, dead.

The Arbiter and most of the Elites had been setting up a crude barricade of crates and bodies during a lull in the fighting. Only

Johnson, his squad of ODS'Ts, Commander 'Vadumee, and two pairs of Hunters were still fighting in the open.

"Hunters and humans! Get behind this barricade! There are too many Flood for us to handle out in the open!" shouted the Arbiter. Quickly, the Marines ran to the barricade and took up positions behind it. The Hunters fired a last few blasts from their Fuel Rod Guns and then began lumbering back.

A Combat Form ran up to a Hunter and was about to shoot him in the back when the Hunter whipped his shield over his head and crushed the Combat Form on to the floor. Some Elites parted the barricade to let the large Hunters through. However, the walking tanks did not come behind it. Apparently, the Hunters didn't think they needed to be behind a barricade, which was true. They turned around as the Elites closed up the barricade and wiped out a group of Flood who were standing near the ruined door with their Fuel Rod Guns. All that remained was a olive-green puddle of blood.

The Helljumpers sheathed their SMGs, Magnums, and Shotguns and pulled out Battle Rifles, which were better suited for taking out Flood at long range. The Elites also put away Needlers and Plasma Rifles in exchange for Carbines. The yellow-orange and green streaks of Battle Rifle and Carbine shots filled the air as the Alliance troops took potshots at the Flood.

Johnson was pausing to reload his Battle Rifle when he noticed a few Grunts running around. There weren't many of the short, stocky aliens remaining, but a couple green-armored Grunts, their heavy equipment officers, were setting up light plasma cannons along the barricade. After completing their tasks the little aliens scampered back to the secondary barricade, which was put in place in case the primary barricade was overrun. Johnson guessed that the Grunts were not taking part in the fighting because they had no shields and very light armor, and therefore would be easy targets for the Flood.

Elites quickly moved to man the light plasma cannons that the Grunts had set up. They began pouring out blue streams of plasma-charged death at the Flood who were charging the barricade. The wall behind the Flood, which was already filled with holes from human projectiles and plasma burns, became even more pockmarked as the plasma cannons spewed fire endlessly. Grotesque shapes that had once been internal organs of the Flood hosts also stuck to the wall as they were fused on by a plasma bolt or hammered in by a bullet.

Sergeant Johnson suddenly saw a flash of light and a familiar \_whoosh\_ as a M19 SSM Rocket Launcher discharged one of its rockets.

"Rockets! Duck!" yelled Johnson urgently. However, the rocket was not aimed at the Alliance troops behind the barricade.

The rocket streaked towards a Hunter, who had thrown up his shield in the nick of time. The high-explosive warhead detonated, send a wave of heat across nearby soldiers. The Hunter gave a low wail and stumbled back, bleeding profusely despite the protection of his shield. Johnson hastily killed the M19-wielding Combat Form with a few quick bursts. He pulled the pin out of one of his frag grenades and tossed it near the launcher on the floor.



"Fire in the hole!" Johnson yelled, dropping himself behind the barricade and tuning down his suit's highly sensitive audio receptors. A few of the non-human Alliance members paused for a split-second, confused, until they saw the primed grenade on the ground and the humans ducking behind the barricade. As they stooped down behind the barrier as well, the grenade detonated with a muffled \_thump\_.

A second wave of heat washed over the barricade, more intense this time, accompanied by a loud explosion as the one remaining rocket in the M19's tube detonated.

"There, that takes care of annoying bastards with Rocket Launchers," Johnson said, standing up and opening fire once more.

A small group of white-armored Grunts ran out to the Hunter, the likes of which Johnson had never seen before. Judging by the fact that the Grunts were straining to pull the wounded Hunter back, he assumed they were medics of some sort. Once the white Grunts had the Hunter behind the barricade, they grabbed some purple packages, pulled out some equipment and started, as far as Johnson could tell, to heal the Hunter.

One of the Hunters, presumably the injured Hunter's Bond Brother, gave a booming roar of anger and charged the hapless Flood, firing his Fuel Rod Gun as he went. The Alliance troops lowered their weapons and watched in awe as the Hunter swept his Fuel Rod Gun among the Combat Forms at point-blank range, demolishing many of them at once. Bullets and plasma pinged off of the monstrous alien's armor and shield as the Flood tried to stop him, but they might as well have thrown stones at it. Before long there were only scraps of the Combat Forms left, and few pulverized bodies that the Hunter had smashed with his shield.

Before the ODSTS, Elites, Grunts, and Hunters could begin to relax, however, four large green blobs sped out of the darkened hallway that the blast door once led into. All of the blobs hit the Hunter that had just decimated the Flood dead-on. The Hunter began to raise his shield but ran out of time. Bright orange blood splattered everywhere as the blobs, which launched from the infantry variant of the Fuel Rod Gun, detonated on the Hunter's armor. One shot exploded near the Hunter's exposed neck and the massive creature fell without any noise of pain. The floorplates shook as the Hunter's body hit the ground.

The wounded Hunter struggled weakly against the Grunt medics' hold. The creature was furious at the death of his Bond Brother, and would've shaken off the Grunts and run to attack the Flood had he not been so badly wounded. After struggling for a short while, the Hunter collapsed on the floor once more.

Seconds later, a swarm of Combat Forms flooded into the room. The Combat Forms were running wildly about and some tripped over the Hunter's corpse. Once they got their bearings, however, they started to fire at the Alliance troops. The form that held the Fuel Rod Gun, an infected Marine, pointed it at the barricade and squeezed the firing stud.

Another green ball of light flashed through the air, hitting the

barricade. Bits of purple shrapnel and other bits of metal spewed everywhere as a portion of the barrier was obliterated, killing three Major Elites. Purple blood and pieces of armor hit the floor as the Elites fell.

"Take 'em out!" Johnson yelled without a trace of fear or nervousness. A torrent of Battle Rifle and Carbine shots flew at the lone Combat Form who held the Fuel Rod Gun. The Sergeant blinked and the form was shredded by the countless bullets that were aimed at it. The Fuel Rod Gun dropped to the ground with a \_clank\_, and another Combat Form tried to scoop it up. An emerald Carbine projectile, fired by the Arbiter, hit the Fuel Rod Gun's firing chamber and the weapon's volatile ammunition went up in a burst of green light, taking several Flood forms with it.

The Elites who had manning plasma turrets had taken cover in case more Fuel Rod shots or rockets were fired at their vulnerable positions. They started the weapons up once more and let loose a constant stream of deadly plasma, cutting down most of the Combat Forms where they stood.

The Arbiter took his time reloading his Carbine, noting happily that the battle was going in their favor, and that the Phantoms that the Elite-controlled cruiser had launched could be clearly seen by now. He glanced over, watching some ODSTs mow down a group of Combat forms with their Magnums, when suddenly, a shout rang out over the COM channel.

\_"Arbiter, look out behind you!"\_ yelled Sergeant Johnson over the COM in an unexpected move to help his former enemy. The Arbiter did a quick about-face and stared in horror at what he was seeing.

A massive amount of Infection Forms had fallen from an open vent in the ceiling, right behind the Arbiter. They charged the helpless Elite, who had not even finished reloading. When he did put the clip in, he started to fire, but there were too many of the infectious pods. Carbine shots slashed through a few pods and the resulting blast popped a few more, but they kept coming. His shield was down before he even knew it, and he saw a fresh group of forms skittering towards him. He raised his Carbine to shoot the Infection Forms before they got to him, but when he pulled the trigger, the Carbine's firing chamber gave a dry click.

The weapon's clip was empty.

\_It is all over now\_, was the Arbiter's final thought, as the Infection Forms lunged.

## 5. Impossible Task

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\*\*Happy Holidays!\*\*\*\*Update 1/11/05: Fixed some typos. I'll review more carefully \_before\_ submitting next time. Sorry.\*\***

**\_\*\*A/N: \*\*None! Ain't you happy? Well, I guess that stuff between the lines up there counts as an A/N. Hey, at least you're not getting that much crap from me.\_**

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_NuclearMage: I would appreciate help if I'm going to do romance, thanks for the offer (I'm going to need a lot of help). It'd be nice to add it, there's got to be more to this fic than killing and plot development. Also, that was a fairly large mistake of not describing the setting. Glad that somebody else picked it upâ€¦it's pathetic that I didn't. Well, I'm off to beat my head on the wall for a few minutes.\_

\_pzgr6: Hmmâ€¦are you right? Next chapter you'll find out.\_

\_halo marinel: You keep your opinion and I'll keep mine. And yes, I like cliffhangers.\_

\_Ninjoc: Not most original? If anything's not original, it's those endless spin-offs of Halo 3 fics clogging up FFN! Meh, just kidding, but I \_was\_ one of the first to publish Halo 3 fanfiction hereâ€¦well, I guess I'm overreacting. Thanks for the review.\_

\_PROPHETOFTRUTH: That's rather unfair. If you've read the Halo books, humans are losing, dying, etc. left and right. Why shouldn't they have the good end of things for once? And besides, Johnson was trying to keep his men alive and had them pull back more. Argh, conflicting reviews-somebody wants me to kill humans (that's what you mean, right?) and somebody wants to keep them all alive! Well, anyway, thanks for the review, and don't mind me if I sound too defensive. It's just my nature.\_

\_Everyone else\_\_: Thanks for the good reviews!\_

**\*\*Chapter 4: Impossible Task\*\***

**\*\*2359 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™™|  
\*\*\*Unidentified Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, holding  
position behind Covenant staging point around Mars.\*\***

Seconds ticked by as the Master Chief faced down Cura 'Canarmee. The seconds were like hours to the Chief, with tensions running high. It was like a clip from a centuries-old Wild West movie the Chief had seen as a child, when the sheriff faced down the outlaw. The Spartan could've sworn he heard some sort of light whisper sweep through the room, and he noticed that all the other prisoners were talking amongst themselves.

The Master Chief was ready to send a set of shots into the Elite's head and give him some skull ventilation, should the Elite even begin to fire his own Carbine. The Elite stared hard into the faceless visor of the Spartan, and the Chief stared at the face of what he regarded as an enemy, a merciless killer. For what seemed like an eternity, neither creature spoke or moved.

Finally, 'Canarmee gave a deep, booming laugh and lowered his weapon.

The Chief, startled, nearly pulled his Carbine's trigger, but then relaxed slightly. However, he kept the Carbine trained on the Elite's head.

"You do not take an Elite on his word?" 'Canarmee repeated, his mandibles still arranged in what the Chief guessed was a smile. "Obviously, you have never had any dealings with our kind, aside from killing us. However, I must make allowances for you, Demon, for I am distrustful of you as well. Let us begin a new age of friendship and trust between our races to fight the Covenant together—we must, or we will be destroyed."

The Chief thought about it for a moment, then dropped the barrel of his Carbine down at last. "Yes, we fight—together," he said, though he would never fully trust the Elite at heart.

The Elite bowed to the Master Chief with both hands extended, palms up. It was the ritual, time-honored sign of respect of the Elites. Slowly, the Chief did the same, though it grated against all of his instincts to expose his neck to a former enemy.

Straightening up, the Chief saw that the twelve Grunts and three other Elites had all picked up weapons off of the bodies of the guards. The Hunters were watching the heavy bulkhead on the far end of the room as though longing to blast through it to get to the other side.

Once the former Covenant troops were fully armed and ready to move out, all four Elites held Carbines. Half the Grunts had Plasma Pistols, and half of them wielded Needlers. 'Canarmee nodded to the Hunters. The Chief's mind took a second to register what this could mean, before the Hunters sprang into action with surprising speed.

Motes of green light collected near the barrels of the Hunters' Fuel Rod Guns. The weapons discharged, punching a series of long gashes clean through the door and melting what was left. The Hunters charged forward and smashed in the bulkhead with their shields. The heavy metal collapsed inwards like a broken sheet of paper.

There was a buzzing noise, and 'Canarmee yelled, "Drones!" In unison, the band of ex-Covenant soldiers and one Spartan raised their weapons. There was a blast that shook the deckplates as the Hunters fired their Fuel Rod Guns again. Drones made insect-like shrieks of pain as they were disintegrated by the deadly beams. Thick, viscous white blood showered down on the Hunters.

A swarm of Drones made it past the Hunters, flying into the room where the rest of the soldiers were assembled. Before the giant insect-like creatures could even begin firing, they were torn to pieces as the Elites, Grunts, and Spartan fired upwards. The corpses tumbled to the ground, twitched a few times, and stopped moving as the Elites crushed them with their armored boots.

Satisfied, the Chief hit the magazine release button on his Carbine. The top-mounted clip automatically ejected and the Chief slapped a fresh one in. The ammunition indicator on the clip glowed solid green, indicating that it was full. He waited cautiously until the Elites and their cronies moved up through the hole that the Hunters had created, then followed. Another shriek of the Hunters' Fuel Rod Guns rattled the Chief's bones as he entered.

The two Hunters were standing on the bodies of a few Covenant Jackals, who either had large holes through their bodies or were

mangled beyond recognition. Obviously, the Jackals had tried to hide behind their shields, which offered no protection against the Fuel Rod Guns and the shield bashes of the Hunters.

The Master Chief paused as he looked around the chamber he had just entered. It was a multi-level room, each level's floor slightly slanted. He noticed a ramp leading upwards in a corner and realized the whole room was just a giant spiral ramp. He looked up and saw the endless rings of the ramp spiraling upwards. An intense white light emanated from the top, which was saying something, as the top of the ramp could barely be seen from the bottom.

"There must be an easier way to get up," said the Chief to 'Canarmee. "It would be too time-consuming to actually walk up it, and there is bound to be heavy resistance."

"Yes, Demon, there is a way," 'Canarmee replied. He pointed with his Carbine at the center of the room. A circular section of the deck was darker than the rest and even more heavily carved. Nearby, a holographic panel stood, glowing with a shimmering blue light "That is a lift platform. I suggest that we take it."

The Chief nodded and piled on to it with the Grunts and Elites. 'Canarmee turned to one of his fellow Elites.

"'Nolsamee, you will have to stay here with the Hunters. Once we reach the top, we will send the lift back down so you can bring the Hunters up with you."

The Elite called 'Nolsamee touched his hand to his helmeted forehead, a sign of acknowledgement. He stepped off the lift platform and stood next to the two Hunters. The Chief understood; the lift was cramped enough without having two Hunters on it.

'Canarmee strode over to the shimmering blue holo panel and was about to touch his hand to it when a door one level above slid open. The Elite counted seven Brutes as they poured out of the door. He shouldered his Carbine and sent a few rounds into the first Brute. Around him, others were doing the same.

The first Brute was riddled with holes, but still, it did not fall. Instead, the creature gave a roar that reverberated around the huge chamber and jumped down a level, crushing a Jackal's body that it landed upon. It charged the group assembled on the lift, and was just about to send the nearest Grunt flying when the Chief put a well-aimed shot through the Brute's head.

The Grunt squealed in fear as dark blue blood drenched his silvery-gray armor. The Brute's body slumped onto the unfortunate Grunt as well. The Chief heard the Grunt straining to push the Brute's corpse off. The Chief would've laughed, had he not had so many years of military training and experience. He shoved the dead Brute off the Grunt, who jumped up and began firing his Needler blindly at the other Brutes on the second level.

After expending another clip's worth of Carbine bullets with only two kills, the Chief hit the activation switch on a plasma grenade on tossed it up. Two Elites followed his example, as did some of the Grunts. However, the short and relatively weak Grunts didn't have enough strength to throw their grenades that far. Theirs merely flew

into the air, hit the wall, and exploded. Once again, the Master Chief found it humorous to be fighting alongside Grunts, but pushed the thought aside.

The plasma grenades that had been thrown with enough force adhered to the furry hides of the Brutes, who howled in anger and tried to tear them off, but failed. A bloody arm flopped down in front of the Chief, who kicked it aside impassively.

Faced with the wave of Carbine bullets from the Elites and sidearm fire from the Grunts, the Brutes were soon knocked off their feet and put down for good. 'Canarmee touched his hand to the lift controls, which glowed red briefly, then cooled back to blue. The Chief heard machinery crank and the lift began to move up rather quickly. He reloaded his weapons and crouched down, looking for targets.

He moved to the edge and noticed some light blue particles sweeping up. Looking down, he saw that the lift was moved by some sort of gravity system, much like Covenant grav lifts, but this system was used to push something. It even looked like the alien grav lift systems. The Chief surmised that the Covenant, being imitative rather than innovative, simply stole the gravity-manipulating technologies of the Forerunners.

The Spartan gave a disdainful snort. The Covenant-they were the primitive, barbaric, conglomeration of races, in his mind-trying to wipe out the humans for little to no reason, winning only because of their numbers and superior space forces. The Chief suspected that their warships, or in fact all their technologies were so advanced just because they had stolen technology from the Forerunners, not even bothering to improve on it. The Covenant even had the nerve to copy the ODST HEV drop pod concepts for their Elites. And they called the humans' technologies primitive.

If there was as many Spartans as there were Elites, and as many Marines as there were Grunts, the Covenant would barely stand a chance on the ground. Even as it was, the UNSC forces had won quite a few ground engagements. However, the victories on the ground proved to be pointless as space battles were lost and planets glassed anyway. A image of the charred remains of Reach suddenly flashed unbidden into the Master Chief's mind. His home, or at least what he had known as his home. Destroyed forever. For reasons that the humans still did not completely understand, reasons that would never make sense to them.

The Chief gave a slight shake of his head and tightened his grip on the Carbine. It wasn't his job to contemplate conditions such as those; his job was to fight, and do whatever he could to win. He put the Carbine into the primary weapons holster on the back of his armor and pulled out both of his Needlers, scanning for enemy soldiers once again.

"Demon, we are approaching the control center, what you would call the bridge, of this vessel," 'Canarmee said. The Elite had walked over from the other side of the lift to speak with the Chief. "I remember clearly how to get to the control room. My squad and I were part of the Spec Ops group assigned to guard the control room, before the Brutes took power. It is natural, therefore, that we should know how to get there. However, that is not the reason I have come to speak to you.

"We must prepare ourselves for the fight, Demon. My Elite brethren and I are the best of the best, much like yourself. These Grunts are also the best of their kind, equipped with the heaviest armor they can carry. And you, Demon, you fight as well as any normal Spec Ops Elite. You have killed many of them-they are the ones with black armor. Most likely you are even better than a Commando such as me. You have defeated many warriors from the Commando sect of the Spec Ops division, the ones you see with white armor such as mine. Some would even call you the Arbiter of the humans, the greatest and most skilled warrior in the Elite ranks. Even with our considerable prowess, and the support of the Hunters, this fight will be one of the toughest you might face."

It felt odd, receiving praise by the ones he had once hated. "I appreciate the praise and the warning, 'Canarmee. However, we need a way to win this fight. Praise and warnings will get us nowhere once we come up against hordes of Covenant soldiers. It is obvious that this will not be an easy battle. With our limited numbers, we cannot engage the Covenant in direct battle, despite our superior skills," the Chief replied grimly.

"I thought that you would raise an objection such as this," said 'Canarmee calmly. "However, there is no need to fear. I am certain of the fact that many more of the Spec Ops troops assigned to guard the control room are being kept prisoner in one of the antechambers that are connected to the upper levels of this atrium. If we could rescue them, we may have enough forces to take the control room by force."

The Master Chief mulled over the proposition mentally. Obviously, the prisoners would be heavily guarded, but it was likely that the majority of the Covenant forces would be guarding the Prophet of Truth, not some lowly, seemingly unimportant prisoners. It would be an obvious advantage to gain more forces, and the rescued prisoners would offset most losses that would be sustained while assaulting the room. He nodded once to signify his approval.

The lift clanked into position with the floor as it arrived on the uppermost level. "Good. We shall wait for the Hunters to arrive, then we will begin our assault," 'Canarmee growled.

A few of the omnipresent purple Covenant equipment crates were scattered around the top of the atrium. The three Elites and the Spartan took up defensive positions. The Chief once again crouched down behind a crate, watching one of the many doors that ringed the level. He put away his Needlers and propped his Carbine up on the crate, waiting for any sign of movement through the door's translucent windows.

Around him, 'Canarmee and his two brethren were doing the same. After setting up a ring of defensive crates, 'Canarmee activated the lift, sending it down to the waiting 'Nolsamee and the Hunters. He beckoned the twelve Grunts over, who were squabbling over the four Fuel Rod Guns they had found in an overturned crate. They quit arguing, grabbed the cannons and scampered over to the Elite. He instructed them to cover one of the many doors that ringed the level, then took up his own position.

The Chief took the welcome opportunity to rest. After fighting the

Flood and Covenant nearly nonstop from the moment he entered the High Charity to the present point in time, he was worn out. The Slipspace jump that the Forerunner vessel took from High Charity to Earth was very brief, so it had not allowed for any rest at all. He assumed that the trip was so short because of the Forerunners' advanced Slipspace technologies, some of which he had dealt with shortly after the first Halo incident.

Still, the Master Chief was forced to be alert, because he was still in hostile territory. He listened intently for the slightest whisper of a noise. Because his sense of hearing was greatly increasing by biological augmentation and the Mjolnir Mark VI's audio receptors, even a Grunt moving slightly was like a blast in the ear. He switched on his suit's thermal vision detectors, which were powerful enough to pick up heat sources through many layers of metal, stone, or virtually any material. To his relief, there were no inbound heat signatures, though there seemed to be large groups of enemies all around.

A sudden, distant \_clank\_ startled the Chief as he scanned the area. He quickly picked up his Carbine but remembered that it was the sound of the lift reaching the bottom of the chamber. He eased his grip on the weapon and forced himself to relax. Some Elites shifted uncomfortably nearby. It seemed that they preferred combat to sitting around, waiting on guard duty.

The Master Chief began to feel the pangs of hunger. Despite being a biologically enhanced, hardened super-soldier, he was still human. After taking another look around to make sure his surroundings were secure, he retracted the visor on his suit's visor. The retractable visor was a useful addition to the Mark VI system, and he used it to his advantage as he pulled out an energy bar and began to eat it. The bar was equivalent to a whole meal in terms of calories and nutrition, enough to keep even a Spartan's accelerated metabolism in check for a while. Therefore, within half a minute, the Chief was ready to go again. He took a drink of water through the suit's hydration system, sealed up his helmet visor, and discarded the energy bar's wrapper.

Before long, the lift had come up and 'Nolsamee and the two Hunters stepped off and joined the main party of warriors. The motley assortment of soldiers assembled near the lift as 'Canarmee relayed the plans he had.

"As we stand now, we don't have the numbers to assault and capture the Prophet of Truth. Clearly, he is defended by legions of his best warriors. However, you all know of the former Royal Guard Unit that was recently disbanded and imprisoned by the treacherous Prophets. They are currently being held in an improvised detention block, not far from here. It is my intention to free the Royal Guard Unit, so that we may exact our revenge upon the Prophets."

The other three Elites gave a growl of approval and the Grunts chattered incessantly with each other. The Hunters gave a low grunt but otherwise did not move. The Master Chief stood to the side, slightly removed from the rest of the group. He quietly checked his equipment over habitually. The Spartan opened one belt pouch and, to his surprise, pulled out a thin black cable. He inspected the device carefully, as he did not remember packing anything like it.



The long cable turned out to be a fiber-optics probe. The Chief plugged it into his helmet and found that it was fully operational. Slightly confused as to how the probe got into his equipment pouch, he nonetheless was grateful for the useful probe. It would allow him to scope out a situation without actually exposing himself to much danger.

The Spartan unplugged the probe and joined the rest of his allies, who were preparing to break into the room that held the former Royal Guards.

"Hold on," the Chief said, before the Hunters could start smashing into the door. "I have a fiber-optics probe. With it, I can figure out whether or not we'll be getting into something way over our heads." The Elites looked to 'Canarmee, who seemed to be the natural leader just as the Chief was among his Spartans. 'Canarmee nodded towards the Chief and gave a flick of his wrist. It was obviously a sign to proceed.

The Elite spoke in a series of low grunts and the Hunters moved away from the door. The Master Chief inserted the probe into one of his helmet data ports and snaked it through a tiny fissure in the door. A small screen popped up in the corner of his HUD. There was a short burst of static across it, then a clear, crisp image resolved onscreen.

The Chief took in everything. The chamber was huge, with several towering pillars throughout it. A long series of smaller rooms lined the side across from the door, which, when covered by an energy projector, would serve as prison cells, just like the chamber where he found 'Canarmee. At least thirty Brutes and fifty Jackals were in the room. Only half those numbers, however, were on active patrol duty. In fact, the other half appeared to be sleeping. As the Chief panned the probe to take in more of the room, he fought down a sense of revulsion.

Mutilated bodies, all wearing black armor stained with blood and body parts, were lying against the left wall of the chamber. They were mostly Elites but a few Grunts as well. Their faces were the very picture of suffering and agony. The unfortunate aliens seemed to have been killed in every possible way. Dark purple and light blue blood was smeared all over the walls and the flooring. An Elite with his entrails ripped out was lying in the middle of the room. The Elite's chest was torn open and blood still leaked out of it. Some Grunts were lying in a corner, apparently untouched, until the Chief noticed that all their methane breath masks were ripped off.

A few remaining survivors were slumped down in their cells. Near one of the pillars, some Brutes and Jackals argued over a chunk of meat. One particularly large Brute grabbed the Jackal holding the meat and flung him against the wall with all his might. The Jackal's face contorted with pain and he fell. The Brute grabbed the hunk of meat in the Jackal's limp hand and devoured it.

The Master Chief shook his head in disgust. When the Elites were in command, at least they maintained order intelligently without killing everything that disobeyed them. Now, the new Covenant officers, the Brutes, were little more than savage, muscular murderers who would just as easily kill someone on their own side as they would an enemy.

The Chief waved 'Canarmee over. "You should see this," he said, then stopped. How would the Elite's suit electronics interface with the human fiber-optics probe? Before the Spartan could figure out a solution, 'Canarmee had come over.

"What is it, Demon?" asked the Elite in a throaty voice. "Do you wish to show me something?"

"Yes, I do, butâ€¦" the Chief halted when 'Canarmee grabbed the probe and inserted it into his own helmet.

"We Elites use these probes frequently, Demon. Luckily, it appears that our two systems are compatible." The Elite went silent as he surveyed the room through the displays mounted over his eyes. The Chief noticed that 'Canarmee's hands were tightening into fists and his mandibles were grinding into each other. Finally, the Elite removed the probe, threw it down, and went to converse with his brethren. They were speaking in their own language, so the Chief couldn't understand, but 'Canarmee's words were loud and harsh, and the Spartan knew that the Elite was angry.

The Chief tucked the probe carefully away into a pocket, then gathered up his combat gear and prepared to move out. He rested the barrel of his Carbine on his shoulder as he waited for 'Canarmee and the other ex-Covenant to join him by the door.

"We have decided that we will free the prisoners, even though very few are left alive," 'Canarmee reported. "After that, there is only one option. The Prophet of Truth must be stopped-no matter what the cost. How we will accomplish that, I do not know. The task may very well be impossible. But for now, this operation goes as planned."

## 6. Breaking Out

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\_\*\*A/N: \*\***Expect this fic to grow into something of a full-length novel (30 chapters and 100,000 words). Also, I'll have a little more of the story told from the Arbiter's perspective (third person POV, as is my custom), because he is one of the integral characters of the story like the Master Chief and I felt I wasn't giving him enough attention before. I know, there are some Johnson fans, but I want to have a different perspective. Don't worry, there still will be a lot of Johnson. Finally, the Elites, Hunters, and Grunts are obviously no longer part of the Covenant, but I will still use the term to class non-human ships, weapons, etc. for a lack of a better term. Later I'll introduce something else. Oh and, when there is a **\*\*horizontal line\*\*** across the page, it means time has elapsed, because when I put the traditional three stars on, they don't show up.  
Enjoy!\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

**\_HaloElite:** Thanks for reading over my shoulder, asshole. (For those of you who don't know, he is my older brother, got the idea for writing fanfiction from me, and is generally a royal pain in the ass. He reads over my shoulder often, hence his odd ability to predict

what will happen in my story. I know that for a fact.)  
Anticlimacticâ€¦what, would you expect me to kill off one of the  
integral parts of the Halo 2 story so quickly? And as for your other  
questions, I can't answer themâ€¦yet.\_

\_pzgr6: I really didn't want to give it away, but for one of my  
dedicated readers, I'll give an answer. Yes, expect a return of the  
surviving members of the SPARTAN-II program, and a few more surprises  
as well. Thanks for the support!\_

\_NuclearMage: Yo! Thanks for the review! Wait, you're another  
dedicated reader. So I should be answering questionsâ€¦check your  
email. I sent something.\_

\_Spacefan: Hmm. Interesting point. I'll keep it in mind. Thanks for  
the tip.\_

\_Khellendros: Ah, yes, he \_was \_getting mobbed by Infection Forms,  
but you'll see what happens. I appreciate the compliments.\_

\_The Phoenix King: You are correct in the assumption it can be  
detonated with the Commander's CNI transponder, but if the reactor  
was dismantled or mangled, it wouldn't work anyway.\_

\_Shadow Chaser: Sorry that I didn't get to your review (by accident)  
last time, and sorry that I probably won't be finishing my next  
story. Read the final note in my profile/bio. However, if I get a  
bunch of fanatics running after me with pitchforks and torches  
demanding a final chapter, I'll do it. Thanks for the review,  
though.\_

\_Shout outs to everyone else who reviewed\_\_: Billy Wankington and  
Ultra Sonic 007\_

**\*\*Chapter 5: Breaking Out**  
> <span>**\*\***

**\*\*2027 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™™|**  
**Unidentified Ship Bay, Covenant Holy City "High Charity," Sanctum of**  
**the Hierarchs.\*\***

The Arbiter crouched in a traditional Elite fighting stance as he  
prepared to meet the charging Infection Forms head-on. He gripped the  
empty Carbine tightly and whacked its barrel onto the first form as  
if it were a metal rod. The resulting explosion caused several others  
to pop. Tentacles and the feathery remains of the Infection Forms  
rained down on him.

The Elite continued to bash away at the masses of forms. Around him,  
more forms were falling and attacking the other Alliance troops. They  
were busy with their own situation, so they could not offer the  
Arbiter assistance. However, it looked as if he would kill off all of  
his attackers, until a group of them charged him from behind.

The Arbiter saw the red blips approaching on his motion tracker and  
spun around to face the new threat. He punched, kicked, and squeezed  
the life out of any Infection Form he could reach, but \_another\_  
group of them fell from the open vent behind him. A form hit his  
shoulders and the Elite jerked in pain as the Infection Form's  
penetrator punched a hole in his neck armor and probed inside,

searching for the Elite's spine.

The parasite found and tapped the Elite's spine, sending a blast of pain through the Arbiter's body. He gave a roar but could not make a further cry for assistance as the Infection Form slowly took over his body, his heart, and his mind. He tried to reach back, but could not. The intense pain was subsiding; he couldn't feel much of anything now.

The Arbiter felt a strange sense of calm as he prepared for his final ascension. The Elite's eyes slowly began to cloudâ€”he was about to join his forefathersâ€”

Suddenly, a series of yellow-orange lines streaked across his dimming vision. The Arbiter's helmet was splattered with the blood of the Infection Forms and he stumbled backwards slightly. A few more of the human projectiles flashed before his failing eyes, cutting through the remaining Infection Forms. There was a pop behind him as the Infection Form bent on domination of its host was killed by a well-aimed bullet.

The Arbiter sank to his knees, panting. He felt a brief period of dizziness, and the deckplates before him seemed to waver. He tried to move his limbs, but they felt like lead weights attached to his body. Eventually, his vision cleared, and he was able to control his own movements once more. Luckily for him, the Infection Form had not had time to completely take over him and wipe the last traces of his existence from his body.

The Arbiter rose and glanced towards the source of the gunfire that had saved him. He saw one of the armored humans holding a smoking rifle. He couldn't tell which one of them it was, due to the visor on the human's helmet, but the Elite doubted he would've known anyway. All the humans seemed to be the same to him. Regardless, the Arbiter nodded his thanks.

"I am grateful for the assistanceâ€”human," the Elite said grudgingly. The armored figure reloaded his Battle Rifle and sheathed it on the holster on his back. He went to stand with the group of nearby human soldiers—were they called Helljumpers? Yes that was it.

"No problemâ€”Elite," drawled the human. "And the name's Johnson, not 'human.' Remember that."

Johnson. The Arbiter had frequently heard the name uttered on the human communications networks, and, more recently, he had fought alongside the Marine. From what the Arbiter had seen, the human was a skilled sharpshooter and had exceptional combat capabilities for an average human.

"Very well, huma-Johnson," the Arbiter replied, hastily changing his words mid-sentence. He scrounged some Carbine ammunition off of some bodies on the floor and reloaded his weapon. He also picked up a fallen Plasma Rifle, checking its battery charge. It read at 91 charge. Satisfied, he put it away for use as a secondary weapon, so he wouldn't be in trouble should his Carbine run out of ammo.

After picking up a few blood-splattered plasma grenades, the Elite chanced a quick glance out through the ship bay's energy field. The

group of Phantoms was making its final approach. Nearby, Commander 'Vadumee crossed over to a row of holographic control panels and hit one of the controls mounted on the wall. The first wall of energy separating the bay from open space faded away. There was a \_thump\_ as the atmosphere inside explosively decompressed.

The Phantoms, numbering ten in all, moved into the space between the two energy wall emitters. Once the last Phantom was within the confines of both the energy fields, the outer field reactivated. 'Vadumee then repressurized the area between the fields and dropped the inner energy wall, allowing the Phantoms to drift into the cavernous ship bay. Their miniature grav lifts activated, and the Alliance soldiers began stepping into them.

The Arbiter watched as Johnson and his squad of Helljumpers disappeared into a Phantom. He felt a thump on his shoulder as he turned away. It was 'Vadumee.

The Spec Ops Commander was laughing hoarsely, or laughing as well as he could, given that his lower-left mandible had been ripped off in a previous, long-gone battle with the Flood. "Ha! That was an exhilarating battle, Arbiter, was it not? We completely annihilated the Parasite! Now, however, we'd best get to our Phantom." With that, 'Vadumee walked off to the last Phantom that had yet to be loaded.

The Arbiter followed with a slight feeling of amusement. The Commander always had been a battle-hungry, adrenaline-driven maniac. But he wasn't Commander of all the Spec Ops troops for nothing. Even now, with the Elites, Grunts, and Hunters disbanded from the Covenant, all of them still regarded 'Vadumee as the Commander because of his great fighting skill and military savvy. The Arbiter reached the Phantom and felt a jolt in his stomach as he was lifted up into the dim interior of the dropship.

Johnson sat with the rest of the Marine squad inside the Phantom they had chosen as it raced out of the High Charity's ship bay he had been fighting in. None of them spoke; most just fiddled with weapons and other gear. There was the steady, high-pitched humming of the alien dropship's engines as it headed towards one of the Alliance-controlled ships in-system. Johnson chinned the control to retract the visor/HUD system of his helmet and took a deep breath of what he thought was fresh air.

The Sergeant immediately regretted his decision as he gagged on the foul stench of the Flood, which was filling the interior of the dropship. Obviously, the olive green blood that stained all of the ODSTs' Trident suits still carried the smell of the Flood. Johnson quickly sealed up his helmet again and breathed easily again on the clean air that came from the filtering and de-odorizing units built into it.

The Sergeant noticed a slight movement in the cockpit, which was not sealed off from the troop bay. One of the two Elites piloting the ship had glanced back at the humans filling the Phantom's interior. The Elite picked up a Plasma Rifle, disengaged his magnetic retention field that held him onto the seat like a restraining device, and headed back into the troop bay.

Johnson, a hardened soldier, watched coolly as the alien warrior

approached, but the other Helljumpers around him tensed. One even brought his M90 Shotgun up to his shoulder, but Johnson gave a quick, downwards wave of his hand. The Helljumper slowly dropped his weapon back to a resting position.

Sergeant Johnson stood to his full height of six feet four inches, plus a few extra four or so inches added by the Trident suit. However, he was still dwarfed by the eight-foot-tall Elite, who wore a carefully burnished suit of red armor. The two adversaries faced each other down. The Elite growled.

"Grrr, you oversized bastard," Johnson growled back. The Elite gave a low chuckle that sometimes passed as laughter among his species.

"A Grunt would not dare speak so scornfully of the great Elites," the warrior said, his mandibles opening wide to expose snow-white, needle-sharp teeth. "You humans must have great courage. But that was known already; previously, we cared not whether you were honorable, courageous, or great warriors worthy of respect. The Prophets made your whole kind seem like worthless, weak and primitive creatures, worthy of nothing of contempt and deserving of the fate that awaited them, a horrible, painful death."

All the time that the Elite was speaking, Johnson's face was becoming twisted with anger. However, his visor prevented the Elite from seeing his face, and the Marine doubted that the alien would've been able to interpret his facial expression anyway. He remained silent, for it seemed that the Elite had more to say.

"Now, however, all of the Elites, and the Grunts and Hunters, know that we have made a grave mistake in following the Prophets. All they have given us is lies, and led many members of our races to certain doom, without any risk for themselves. Indeed, we found out in the end that all their purposes are twisted and only meant for their own stinking hides. Now, on behalf of all the Elites-and I speak for the Hunters and Grunts as well-we wish to issue a formal apology for the crimes we have committed against your race. I know that this apology is pathetic considering all we have done, but it is the most we can do-for now. There will come a day where we can repay our debt to your kind."

\_Well\_, Johnson thought, as he stood there awkwardly, \_he's damn right-that apology is a pathetic one. Billions of humans dead, hundreds of colonies wasted\_-he swallowed in memory of all the comrades, friends, family, and even acquaintances that had been killed. \_I'm not one for all this kiss-and-make-up stuff, especially with aliens like this Elite right here. It's easier just to kill them. But, times changeâ€|they really do changeâ€|\_

"Well, uh, I guess I can speak for my squad when I say, apology accepted," Johnson replied, unsure of what to say, and trying hard to speak somewhat formally, because it seemed that Elites preferred that mode of speech. "I suppose not all of you Elites are so bad, when you're not killing us, I mean. If you're any example of your race, er-"

"'Ranormee," the Elite provided.

"'Ranormee, yeah," repeated the Sergeant. "What I was saying is that it would be an honor to work with you Elites if all of them are like

you."

The Elite looked momentarily amused. "I believe the same will hold true for your race. It will be an honor to fight alongside you," he said. "But enough small talk. I must brief you on what is to come. We are quickly approaching the destroyer Duty and Honor. I believe that a human dropship, designation Alpha 279, is also docked inside. Your Commander is on board as well, but she is under heavy guard. This is not because we are distrustful of her; you will soon see why she needs protection. The Phantom with the Arbiter onboard will also dock here, but the others will split up and be loaded onto different warships. Also, we have a slight problem on our hands, which is the main reason your Commander is being heavily guarded, and I was hoping you and your brethren could be of some assistance."

After an uneventful ride, the two Phantoms, one containing 'Ranormee, Johnson, and the Helljumper squad, and the other with the Arbiter and 'Vadumee inside, decelerated as they made their final approach into the Duty and Honor's ship bay. The bay was set up much like its counterpart on board the High Charity, so the Phantoms cycled through a series of barriers before they entered the bay itself.

A panel in the massive ceiling slid open, and two large docking clamps slid out, bringing the Phantoms to a jolting halt. Their engines and exterior lights dimmed as the Phantoms went to standby status. The Alliance soldiers inside drifted down through the grav lift, then the lifts dimmed as well. The newcomer humans looked around. All of them, with the exception of Johnson, had never even seen the interior of a Covenant warship, much less been inside one.

The ship bay, for a short time, seemed cramped and small to the newcomers, but this was a misconception because the bay was full of Phantoms, Seraphs, and other small Covenant spacecraft. In reality, the bay was a cavernous chamber, with three tiers of levels and a "ground" level. All around, Engineers and Elite technicians made repairs and modifications to the ships. A barrier, complete with its own three levels, separated each "chamber" of the bay from each other, although they were not completely closed at the sides so that equipment and Engineers could pass through. Almost the whole ship bay—from the ceiling, floor, walls, even the pillars—was clad in the durable, faintly purple metal that the Covenant favored. Indirect lighting systems were mounted on the walls and projected onto the ceiling, leaving the room in a state between darkness and light.

The Arbiter glanced around and noticed there was an unusual amount of guards stationed at the entrances to the ship bay. In front of each door was a pair of Elites and six Grunts, all heavily armed. The guards either wore the red armor of Veterans and Majors or the black armor of a regular Spec Ops trooper. Obviously, something was amiss.

Over the clamor of repair and refit, there was a faint hiss as the central ground level door flashed and slid open. A gold-armored Commander Elite and Miranda Keyes, flanked by two Commando Spec Ops Elites wearing shiny gray-white armor, entered the room. The lead Elite strode quickly to the center of the room. Assembled there was the Arbiter, 'Vadumee, the humans, and the crews of the Phantoms they had ridden on. The three Elites who had just entered bowed their heads respectfully. Keyes followed their example. The other Elites

returned the gesture, and, after a whispered command from Johnson, the humans followed their example as well.

"Ah, the Arbiter! And the famed Special Operations Commander, as well! It is a great honor to have such warriors on my vessel! Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sora 'Sonamee, Ship Master of the Duty and Honor. Right now, we have more pressing issues on our hands, so a reception worth of the Arbiter and Spec Ops Commander can not be issued as of this time.

"Mere hours ago, I was rallying our forces to crush the pathetic Brutes that tried to commandeer this ship. Now, however, it seems that we have a new problem on our hands. The stinking Brute scum brought something worse on board than their own worthless hides. Hidden aboard their boarding craft was the Parasite-the bane of the Forerunners. That is why we have stepped up guard duty at the entryways. As of yet, the Parasite has been contained to the lower sections of the Duty and Honor, and all vents that lead up from there have been sealed. However, we still face the arduous task of eliminating the Parasite altogether. This is no easy task, as every last Infection Form must be wiped off the ship."

Johnson, who had already heard all this, leaned against a nearby pillar, looking around. He spotted the gray hull of Alpha 279 over one of the separators. Some green-armored Elites and Engineers were working on the craft. The ODST squad, having heard 'Ranormee telling the Sergeant about the Flood problem on board the Duty and Honor, also knew about the Flood issue, so they relaxed as well. Commander Keyes came over to discuss the newfound alliance and what they would do next. Some Helljumpers, who were quite tired after the long fight on board High Charity, pulled out nutrient bars and quickly scarfed them down.

As the former Covenant soldiers exchanged banter, Johnson watched a group of the black-armored Elites and Grunts approach. They were armed to the teeth with Carbines, Plasma Rifles, and Needlers, and began to perform a thorough search through every nook and cranny on board the Phantoms. Obviously, they weren't risking any more Flood breakouts.

The Elites finished their talk about the Flood and dispersed. The Arbiter, 'Vadumee, and 'Sonamee approached the band of humans. The Arbiter spoke to Johnson, being the most familiar with him.

"We have made the decision to wipe out this infestation before it can spread further. You and your soldiers have the option of remaining behind, as I know that you have been fighting constantly for days now. However, your assistance would be greatly appreciated. We need every warrior we can get. The Flood creatures, as you know, are tenacious enemies to fight."

Johnson laughed heartily. "You think I'd miss out on a good fight just because you think I'm tired? Hell no! I'm coming with you! Though I don't know about these ladies back here," he said, jerking his head towards the Helljumpers.

One ODST, obviously taking offense to Johnson's statement, retorted with "Hey, we ain't gonna miss out on a fight either! I bet we'll get more kills than you, Johnson! We'll see who's the 'lady' around here after we're finished." The others nodded in approval.



"All rightâ€¦\_ladies\_. We'll see," Johnson said. He pulled out a cigar from one of his armor pockets, opened his helmet visor and stuck it in his mouth. "We'll see." He turned to face the Arbiter. "Well, as you've probably figured out already, we're coming with you. Lead the way." Keyes nodded her approval of the Sergeant's decision and was brought back to her quarters by a green-clad Elite, indicating he was a Tech Elite. Johnson heard them talking about some tech mumbo-jumbo as they left.

A heavily armed band of Elites and Grunts, accompanied by three pairs of Hunters and the ODSs, stood at the barricade that had been put together near the blast door that led into the so-called "Flood territory." 'Vadumee spoke briefly with some Spec Ops Commandos that were going to stay behind and guard the barricade, then readied his weapon and joined the others milling about near the blast door, which was sealed and locked shut.

"Open the door!" commanded 'Sonamee, who was coming along to help cleanse his vessel of the filth that inhabited it. The Arbiter, Johnson, 'Sonamee, and 'Vadumee were all the closest to the door, being the most capable warriors. One of the Spec Ops Commandos assigned to guard the door keyed a series of codes into a holo control panel. Ambient lights that surrounded the door flashed, magnetic locks disengaged, and the huge blast doors slowly drifted apart.

The hallway that stretched beyond was lit with the indirect, Covenant style of lighting, and was filled with the greenish "mist" that seemed to follow the Flood wherever they appeared, like flies appearing on a dead corpse. This, combined with the dim Covenant lighting, made it impossible for the Alliance troops to see beyond a few feet. The Trident suits of the ODSs had image filtering, light-enhancement, and flashlights, which helped them navigate with ease.

The Elites' helmets had display systems mounted over the eye slits, and they were the equivalent of a HUD that the human Trident and Mjolnir armor systems had. The Elite displays also had image enhancement, though it was not as advanced as the human's technologies. It was one of the few fields in which the humans seemed to be more advanced-one of the few fields where the Covenant had not stolen any Forerunner information relating to it.

The Grunts were in the worst state. They had quite poor vision to begin with, and had nothing to enhance their vision. They were Spec Ops Commandos, and therefore had the most armor they could carry and received more training than other Grunts, but their morale still dropped as they entered a Flood-held region without being able to properly see and fire at any hostile contact.

The Hunters, either way, would decimate the enemy, so they did not particularly care. However, the Grunts huddled together, trying to stay in the middle of the Elites, Helljumpers, and Hunters. The Arbiter noticed that a few carried Fuel Rod Guns, their fuel casings glowing an eerie green in the glowing darkness. Also, instead of their usual Plasma Pistols, the others held Plasma Rifles, which were usually taken by Elites. However, because of the threat presented by the Flood, all rank structures had been disregarded for the moment, and rifles were always far more effective than pistols.

The Arbiter glanced over, looking over the group of Helljumpers. The humans were armed with an assortment of their own weaponry. However, they also carried a considerable amount of Covenant arms, which they had obtained from the \_Duty and Honor\_'s armory. The Arbiter guessed that the human weapons were running low on ammunition. It was unfortunate; the Arbiter had used the human projectile weapons before and they were much more effective against the Flood than most Covenant plasma-based weapons.

The veteran warrior flexed his four-finger hands on his own armaments. A pair of Elite Plasma Rifles, for short-to-medium range work. Not the most deadly weapons against the Flood, but a tried and true method of hosing the enemy down. The hilt of a Plasma Sword hung from his waist, docile and harmless at the moment but ready to extend a graceful blade capable of cutting through most known materials effortlessly. To top it all off, he had four Plasma Grenades to handle huge groups of the parasitic beasts that were bound to show up.

Behind the search-and-destroy team, there was a gentle hum of motors as the blast door closed. The last bit of light from the brighter corridors faded, and the silence was complete. Despite the fact that every single soldier in the team was a hardened, battle-scarred veteran, some of them began to feel apprehension about the mission they had been sent on. Obviously, it was of the Grunts' nature to do so, but for the well-trained, veteran ODST Special Forces units and Elites, it was a feeling they were unaccustomed to.

Johnson, the Arbiter, 'Vadumee, and 'Sonamee were still striding confidently in front. None of them showed any trace of fear, and, deep down, none of them really felt a sense of foreboding at all. They were just fighters, hungry for a battle, where they could do what they did best.

Kill.

\* \* \*

>Sergeant Avery Johnson peered around yet another corner in the twisting, winding hallways of the <em>Duty and Honor<em>. According to the mission timer he had set in his HUD, it had been half an hour since they had entered this shadowy domain of the Flood, but none of them had seen any sign of the distasteful organism, save the mist that hung all around them. He watched his helmet lights reflect dully off of the burnished deckplates without interest. The Sergeant was a man of action, and he wasn't getting what he wanted.

"Excellency, we have been searching for quite some time now, and we have found nothing." Surprisingly, it was a Grunt that had voiced Johnson's opinion. The Sergeant was inclined to agree, but the Grunt had more to say. "Perhaps they are planning something? I am worried."

'Sonamee sighed. "You're always worried, Mingmin. Besides, you give that damned Parasite too much credit. Plan, indeed. As if those mindless Flood beasts can think at all," he said scornfully.

At this point, 'Vadumee interrupted. He was somewhat of an expert concerning the Flood after many encounters with them, and his

knowledge was not to be trifled with. "You had best watch what you are saying, 'Sonamee. The Flood were initially thought of as mindless machines bent on killing or absorbing everything it laid hands on. However, on the most recently discovered sacred ring, we have been taught otherwise. They are capable of operating all kinds of machinery, from our Ghosts to Wraiths, even to a small human warship. They should be perfectly capable of simple military planning, as well."

'Sonamee clicked his mandibles courteously and nodded. Although a Ship Master, he was still outclassed by both 'Vadumee and the Arbiter. Therefore, he had to respect both the opinions and the orders of his superiors, as both were known to have more combat experience and wisdom than he did.

A slight slithering sound caught the full attention of the Elites and Helljumpers. The Grunts, who had been chattering amongst themselves, quickly brought their talk to a close and looked up, waiting for orders. The Hunters lumbered to a halt and encircled the group, protecting the others with their thick body armor and impregnable shields.

"Everyone, prepare for combat," ordered 'Vadumee.

"You heard the alien. Lock 'n load!" agreed Johnson. He ran a hand over the unfamiliar curves of the Covenant Carbine in his hands and shrugged. It would be more comforting to have a Battle Rifle or Shotgun in his hands, but the Carbine was at least magazine fed, more like human weapons than the Plasma Rifle. The Sergeant pushed the first slug into the Carbine's firing chamber and shouldered the weapon, looking for targets.

All he saw on his motion tracker was yellow; the Tech Elites, and a few techs from the In Amber Clad who had made it off on Alpha 279, had modified the motion tracker system so that Elites, Grunts, and Hunters would not be recognized as enemies. As to how they did it, Johnson had no clue, but he didn't care. It wasn't his job to worry about things like that.

The slithering noise grew louder and more ominous. The sound was like a convicted criminal hearing his own death sentence being given out. Grunts swept their weapons back and forth frantically. The Helljumpers illuminated darker portions with their flashlights in case the a group of Flood could be hiding there. Elites squinted into the green haze, trying to make out targets. The Hunters swept their small beady eyes, taking in everything. All of them were searching for the source of the noise.

Suddenly, a gigantic pack of Combat Forms appeared out of the corridor opposite to the direction in which the Alliance team had come. The seething mass of disfigured Elites and mottled gray-green skin filled the entire hallway as far as the eye could see. The front ranks of this horrific army leapt into the air with a series of bloodcurdling, unearthly shrieks. Johnson sighted his rifle on the lead Combat Form and fired.

The battle was joined.

## **\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\_\*\*A/N: \*\*Sorry that this took SO LONG to get up; I had a whole load of schoolwork and other crap (and Xbox Live, gamertag wumonger) to deal with. I promise the next one will be up in at least ten days. Anywaysâ€|this chapter is a split between two points of view from the Earth battle because I want to divert some attention from the Master Chief, at least for now. Also, human ships will be referred to as "she" or "her," while Covenant ships will be referred to with "it" for differentiating reasons.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_NuclearMage: Heh, yeah. That's all I have to say.\_

\_pzgr6: It wouldn't exactly pop out of nowhere, it would be introduced subtly. I mean, I couldn't stick it in from the beginning. Right now I can't reveal too much.\_

\_Ultra Sonic 007: You'd be surprised as to how many strange things I can mesh together. 'Hanarmee/Keyes, eh? Hmmâ€|sounds like a planâ€|\_

\_Ha, just kidding.\_

\_NOS mercenary: This is a common misconception I've gotten from reviewers. If I do decide to include romance, that DOES NOT mean I'm getting rid of any action! They would be meshed together! And no, it wouldn't be too messed up either, not from my standpoint at least (unfortunately, it's not my standpoint at stake here).\_

\_YamiPaladinofChaos: No, it wouldn't include known characters. There aren't many Marines to go on. The new people wouldn't just appear suddenly, though; they will be introduced in a way that makes sense.\_

\_Dark Dragoon 22: Regarding action, see my reply to NOS mercenary. Also, the name of the author who offered to help I will not personally disclose without his discretion, but it wouldn't be too hard to find. Just search my reviews.\_

\_Blitz-Kun: Most of the other Spartans were KIA with Covenant forces on Reach when the Covenant attacked. I suck at explanations, so I recommend that you read Halo: First Strike. It, and, to a lesser extend, Halo: Fall of Reach give a lot of information regarding the Spartans.\_

\_Chopin: Don't we all want that? Haha, never mind.\_

\_dumass: Sorry, but I don't really want to try something like that. You're right though, it's a great original idea.\_

\_MIKI: Well, there's a lot more Covenant in the bay compared to the ten-man (+Johnson) squad of ODSTs. And, as for the dim lighting, if you've played the game, whenever you're inside a Covenant capital ship or the High Charity, the illumination always seems dim to me. That's how I see it, at least.\_

\_Ninjoc: Thanks for the ideas. Ha, if I showed it to Bungie, they'd probably hunt me down and take me out. I'll consider the John/Linda idea, but Spartans, while I want them emotional and more human-like, I don't think they'd go that far. Point taken, though.\_

\_Much thanks to everyone listed above!\_

\_Shout outs to everyone else who reviewed: HaloElite, Shadow Chaser, Batousai91, keystone (by the way, thanks for letting me use the term "Converts," I'll work it in somehow), Link Master500, Warp Ligia Obscura, Oni, nightdragon0, Unknown, I can't tell you, and Jounouchi Katsuya,\_ \_thanks for the support, compliments, and reviews!\_

\_\*\*A Note

> <span>\*\*For some reason, the "54" on the end of my pen name doesn't show up anymore, and I can't change it back. If anyone has information as to why this might be happening, contact me. I mean, it's not that important, but I sign everything with "aznricechink54" and my personal URL on FFN, well, you know what would happen with that (hopefully).\_

\*\*Chapter 6: Suicide Run\*\*

\*\*0037 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| \*\*\*\*UNSC  
\*\* \*\*\_Cairo\_\*\*\*\* Orbital MAC Defense Station, in geosynchronous orbit around Earth.\*\*

Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood stood in the center of \_Cairo\_ station's circular bridge, hands clasped behind his back as he surveyed the various displays mounted around him. One showed the status of the fleet's strength; others gave diagnostics of the station and views of the battle raging in space.

"Sir, the MAC gun is armed, loaded, and at 100 charge status. We have a firing solution on the nearest Covenant vessel. Permission to fire?" asked the Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Brian Carter. He sat at the weapons console, which monitored the MAC gun's charge and load status, as well as the remaining ammunition and other weapons-related data figures.

"At will, Lieutenant Carter," murmured the Admiral distractedly, as if firing a four-thousand-ton shell that could obliterate nearly any Covenant capital ship was of no concern to him. The shell was a full thousand pounds heavier than the previous version, but the new Mark VI orbital MAC gun station could, with upgraded linear accelerator technology, propel the super-dense projectile at the same speed as the Mark V. Still, the Admiral seemed to brush it off.

However, seeing as there were nearly a thousand other hostile ships in the local Earth space, one could understand the Admiral's indifference. The station's lights dimmed and there was a rumble that reverberated through the whole station. The viewscreen linked to the camera that monitored the station's MAC gun showed the projectile speeding away, glowing an oddly beautiful white-hot as it neared its doomed target. There was a blue explosion in the distance as a Covenant ship ceased to exist.

Admiral Hood had his mind elsewhere. He sat down heavily in the command chair at the center of the bridge, stroking the stubble of his beard pensively. He watched Covenant ships being obliterated left

and right. On the forward viewscreen, as he zoomed in one the Covenant lines, he saw the broken remnants of countless enemy vessels, ripped apart by the fury of the orbital MAC guns.

As he watched the screen, a Covenant ship floated across. Judging by its fairly small size, it was probably a frigate. Bulbous turrets mounted on its hull began to glow a piercing blue. Pulse lasers.

The ship fired. On the upper-right viewscreen, the Admiral could see the beams of light flicker across space. They splashed across defense station Rome, part of the battlecluster nearest to the Cairo. The station's eight-meter thick Titanium-A armor easily absorbed the energy weapon, though there was a gash in its armored hull that glowed red briefly.

Rome responded with its enormous MAC gun. The white-hot projectile streaked through the distance between Rome and the Covenant ship in less than five seconds, striking the enemy ship near its nose. The Covenant ship's shields turned solid silver, then failed under the MAC round's tremendous force. The shell's force ripped the entire frigate's hull apart, leaving nothing but fragments of the ship.

Absentmindedly, Hood pulled his M6C sidearm from its holster and began to spin it. Gun tricks had always been a hobby of his, though he favored using the ancient revolvers from the 1800s era. He could spin them in a blurring pattern that was graceful and captivating in an odd way. Normally, he wouldn't be armed, even with a M6C, but all the bridge officers had their pistols ready because of the recent Covenant incursion on board the Cairo.

He gave the M6C a final spin and holstered it, all in one smooth movement, turning his attention back to the battle for Earth just in time to see a UNSC frigate being ripped apart by four plasma torpedoes. They melted through the frigate's meter-thick armor as if it wasn't there, killed most of the crew, slagged vital components inside, and exited through the frigate's other side.

Hood sent a series of countdown timers for the fleet and MAC stations, coordinating all their fire into a single, destructive volley. The timer appeared in the upper-right corner of the main forward viewscreen, reading 00d:00m:30s. Acknowledgements streamed across a secondary viewscreen to the Admiral's right. Once all ships and stations had accepted the countdown, the timer started.

When the timer hit 00, all hell broke loose. Every ship and MAC station the Admiral could bring to bear fired at once, a huge wave of super-dense projectiles, missiles, and nukes. Covenant ships tried to steer out of the way, but since they were so packed, it was impossible to run. Explosions ranged along the whole length of the alien fleet.

Plasma and pulse lasers cut through the explosions and smoke, headed straight for a formation of UNSC frigates. The less powerful but faster pulse lasers hit first, searing through the frigates' light meter-thick armor. Several frigates spun out of formation as their carefully contained atmospheres explosively decompressed.

Seconds later, the plasma burned through the frigates, going through armor and decks like a knife through hot butter. Several frigates

detonated when their reactors were breached by the powerful energy weapons. Others slowed and their engines dimmed as they lost power, and drifted lifelessly in space.

The Admiral gritted his teeth in anger but tried to look at it from an optimistic point of view. At least the Covenant hadn't reduced the more formidable MAC stations to floating junk heaps. He took a brief moment to wonder why, but was jolted out of his thoughts as the station shook from another MAC discharge.

In the periphery of the main camera, Hood saw several other stations and ships firing as well. More Covenant warships were obliterated on impact, but the enemy ships still were not making a charge that would simply overwhelm the human defenders, who could only bring about a hundred orbital MAC stations to bear on the enemy concentrated on one side of the Earth. Another hundred or so Covenant ships emerged from Slipspace just as five more of their vessels were destroyed by a series of nuclear missiles.

The suicidal strategy of the Covenant seemed oddly familiar. The Covenant were throwing themselves at the orbital guns and UNSC fleets, regardless of casualties. It was reminiscent of a report he had read about a Covenant attack just six months ago.

\_Reach.\_

The Admiral stood up so quickly it was like he had received an electric shock. Quickly, he rapped out orders, a plan quickly forming in his experienced military mind.

"Lieutenant Parsons," he shot at the Communications Officer. "Open up a channel. I want the whole fleet to hear this." Lieutenant Parsons quickly obeyed. In the lower-left corner of the forward viewscreen, a small window opened up, indicating that Public Fleet Communications Channel A was active.

Admiral Hood cleared his throat importantly. "Commanders and Captains of all UNSC vessels and defense stations: listen up! This is Admiral Hood speaking. We might have a serious problem on our hands.

"Now, most, if not all of you know the story of Reach. A Covenant fleet attacked on August 30, 2552, according to the UNSC Military Calendar. They outnumbered the UNSC fleet three-to-one, though we had the advantage of the twenty Mark V orbital guns. The Covenant threw themselves at us, not caring if their fleet survived or was destroyed. They lost more than two-thirds of their fleet due to this suicidal action. Still, it was all a distraction, so they could get their ground-based forces in place to disable our orbital guns. Or was that the real reason? They should have been able to take out the guns anyway.

"We think they were there for a different reason, and our suspicions were furthered by the return of Spartan-117 to Earth High Command, and the chilling report he gave. But that's not the reason I'm making you all listen to this speech, when you should be fighting. Take a good look around you. Especially you veterans of Reach--does it seem familiar?\_

"I think the Covenant are doing the exact same thing as they did on Reach. This slaughter-it's just another distraction. I don't know

what it's for. But I do know this. We're not going to let the Covenant set foot on Earth again, not without a fight. Form a defensive perimeter around all orbital battleclusters. Be on the alert for the Covenant trying to rush Phantoms past. Destroy anything that tries to get into the atmosphere immediately. No questions asked."

There was a chorus of "Yes, sirs" as the leaders of the UNSC ships acknowledged the Admiral's orders. The \_Cairo\_'s lights dimmed again and the massive station shook as the Gunnery Officer fired the MAC round again. The COM Officer closed the channel, and the window in the corner of the main viewscreen snapped off.

The Admiral sat down in the command chair again, punching commands into a datapad mounted in the chair's right armrest. A holographic TAC screen flickered to life, showing blue silhouettes of UNSC ships and orbital defense stations in geosynchronous orbit around Earth. The Covenant ships were also in miniature form on the TAC screen, swarming about and filling a large portion of the screen. Some of the sleek models of the alien warships would abruptly fade to gray, indicating that they had been destroyed.

The humans were taking casualties, too. Whenever the Covenant loosed off a salvo of plasma torpedoes, a repair and refit station would move to block the incoming plasma, but sometimes the unwieldy stations did not arrive in time, and the humans were running out of them. The Admiral glanced at the grayed-out models of the \_Athens\_ and \_Malta\_, the two other stations that had been part of the \_Cairo\_ battlecluster and shivered inwardly. The \_Cairo\_ had nearly met the same fate as its two sister stations: internal destruction by a Covenant-made bomb. Only the heroics of the Master Chief saved the MAC station and its crew from a fiery doom.

The Admiral sighed, shaking his head, then studied the TAC screen again. A large group of Covenant vessels detached themselves from the rest of the fleet. Even their silhouettes were huge, dwarfing the alien destroyers, and they had many bulbous sections. The teardrop-shaped Seraph fighters, tiny specks on the TAC screen, swarmed around them as an escort. Carriers.

"Here they come," the Admiral muttered. "Carter! Get a firing solution on the lead carrier, and charge the MAC gun!"

"Aye, aye," said the Lieutenant, hastily typing in commands. Numbers and data figures scrolled across one side of Carter's screen. The other side was a bar showing the charge status of the MAC gun. The Admiral watched it fill.

"Firing solution online. MAC gun ready to fire, sir."

"Fire!"

The station rumbled yet again, a familiar and comforting feeling to the crew of \_Cairo\_ station. The bridge officers watched as the magnetically accelerated shell flew towards the doomed Covenant carrier, glowing white against the darkness of space. The shot struck full force, puncturing the shield, traveling straight through the length of the carrier, and finally smashing into the shield of the carrier behind the first, knocking out the protective barrier.



The lead carrier came to a halt, apparently untouched except for the hole through it, when the carrier suddenly exploded, showering the nearby vessels with debris. Their shields flickered silver-gray but the carriers continued barreling on towards Earth.

One, two, three of the bulbous Covenant warships were blow away by orbital MAC shells, leaving only glittering fragments. Another two were brought down by ship-based MAC rounds and Archer missiles from a UNSC destroyer and frigate near Rome station. The Covenant weren't returning fire; apparently, they were diverting all power to their engines.

The Admiral looked calm outwardly, but inside he was slightly nervous. If the carriers made it past into Earth's atmosphere—who knew what havoc they could wreak. Admiral Hood shook himself, then stopped, struck by a sudden revelation.

Why were the Covenant charging blindly, stupidly, losing ships unnecessarily? With their advanced Slipspace technologies, they could make a pinpoint intrasystem jump, right past the orbital MAC stations and UNSC fleet. As the Admiral pondered this, another idea popped up in his mind—the Covenant didn't even need to do that. They could jump straight into the atmosphere of Earth.

What were the maniacs in charge of the Covenant thinking? What was their point in doing this? Were they mocking the humans? Or were they trying to prove something? Prove that the humans were so inferior that they couldn't stop a simple charge? Admiral Hood was absolutely perplexed as to why the Covenant would willingly commit suicide. Still, he was grateful for that the enemy fleet had not jumped straight into Earth's atmosphere, regardless of whether or not it was caused by stupidity or whatever other reason he could think up.

A carrier turned and fired its engines to stop its mad dash. Boarding craft, modified versions of the older U-shaped Covenant dropship, began pouring out of the carrier's bulbous launch bays. Pulse laser turrets on the carrier began to charge, their intense blue light filling the forward viewscreen as the Admiral zoomed in on it.

"Take that carrier down, it's launching boarders!" yelled Admiral Hood. "Carter, Get a firing solution, on the double!"

Lieutenant Carter nodded and scrambled to aim the MAC gun. The deck shifted slightly as he fired the station's maneuvering thrusters, putting it in alignment with the enemy carrier. The Covenant carrier fired pulse lasers, tearing through a lightly armored civilian ship whose crew members had volunteered to fight. The beams of light ripped through the half-meter of Titanium-A that the crew had welded on, detonated some outdated Sidewinder-IX missiles strapped to the ship's side, and set off the ammunition for the 155mm cannon that the civilians had mounted on the ventral side of the ship. The civilian yacht exploded in a large ball of orange flames, wreckage spewing out from the cataclysm.

Hood clenched his fists in anger. Those civilians could've easily taken shelter in one of the thousands of bunkers that had been set up planetside for civilian protection; but they had volunteered to fight and gotten themselves killed. The Covenant would pay; they would pay for all they had done.

"Firing, sir," reported the Gunnery Officer, jolting the Admiral out of his dark thoughts. Hood nodded, and \_Cairo\_ shuddered as the MAC gun fired. Onscreen, the carrier's lateral lines began to glow red, indicating the charging of plasma torpedoes. The boarding craft were still arrayed around the Covenant ship, waiting for Seraph escorts to launch from the carrier.

The MAC shell streaked in to ruin the party. The shell punched a hole amidships and went on to destroy a group of Seraphs on the opposite side. The carrier's hull couldn't take the stress of such a powerful blow. It seemed to bend onscreen and suddenly exploded into tiny pieces of metal. The shockwave from the MAC shell also broke holes through the boarding crafts' hulls, causing the Covenant troops inside to suffocate and freeze as the atmosphere inside was sucked into the endless vacuum of space.

The remaining carriers did not halt, however, and continued towards Earth even as ships were shot out of position all around them by MAC shells, Archer missiles, Shiva nuclear missiles, and everything else the humans could throw at them. Despite this, ten carriers made it past the initial ring of defenses, including \_Cairo\_ station. The Admiral watched as they whizzed past.

"Lieutenant Carter, rotate us around so we can have a shot at those carriers!" he ordered with urgency in his voice. The maneuvering thrusters came to life with a dull roar. Carter pushed the station around as fast as he could. The Admiral wasn't worried for nothing-if a single carrier made it past into Earth's atmosphere, the MAC guns wouldn't have a clear shot anymore because if they missed, the shell could wipe out a population center or cause massive tsunamis. If they didn't destroy the carriers, there were probably hundreds or even thousands of Covenant troops aboard them, plus the firepower of the ship itself.

\_Cairo\_ shuddered as it fired again. The shell obliterated one of the bulky Covenant warships instantly. A ship that was lagging behind took four ship-based MAC shells. The carrier's shield blazed and faded out as the super-dense rounds smashed into the ship's hull. The enemy ship's hull literally broke apart into sections from the strain of so many high-velocity impacts on it at once. The carrier's reactor exploded suddenly, engulfing another Covenant ship and heavily damaging it.

Meanwhile, a Seraph wing swarmed about a small UNSC corvette that was on an intercept course, raking its hull with their miniature pulse lasers and small plasma torpedoes. The corvette retaliated with point-defense guns, sending thousands of rounds streaming at the enemy. All around \_Cairo\_ station, other such small battles broke out between the Covenant fighters and UNSC ships and the human forces rushed to counter the carriers, and the Covenant rushed to counter the humans.

Admiral Hood mentally shut out the noise and chaos of the smaller engagements and focused on the main threat: the carriers. A Shiva nuclear missile streaked towards the carriers, exploding in a huge radioactive fireball that would've blinded Admiral Hood had the viewscreen not automatically filtered the intense light. The nuke was followed up by a heavy dose of MAC shells and Archers.

When the reactor detonations that followed cleared up, two carriers

still remained, plummeting into Earth's atmosphere, their shields glowing as the heat of re-entry burned away at them.

"Damn!" Admiral Hood banged his fist down on a railing in a rare display of anger. "Alert General Strauss and all groundside commanders! They're going to have company, real soon!" The COM Officer's hands flew frantically over his keyboard to carry out the Admiral's orders.

Admiral Hood turned the main camera back to face the huge Covenant fleet. They were still massing around Mars, not charging or even firing weapons. The Admiral could only guess at what in hell the maniacs in command of the Covenant fleet were up to. He glanced at the strange, triangular ship that rested slightly behind the enemy fleet, and wondered how the Chief was doing on board it.

He mentally answered his own question, a slight smile touching his lips despite the group of Covenant ships filling the viewscreen.

\_Probably kicking some Covenant ass.\_

\* \* \*

><strong> 0037 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
<strong>\*\*Unidentified Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, holding position behind Covenant staging point around Mars.\*\*

Had Admiral Hood been present on board the Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, he wouldn't have been surprised to see that his assumption was correct. The Chief, having just been attacked by a swarm of wandering Drones, contemptuously crushed the chest of one dead Drone in with his armored boot. Slapping a fresh clip into his Carbine, he turned to the Elites and Grunts who were emerging from their cover to assemble again, near the prison chamber's door.

"Well, human, now that the latest group of pests has been dealt with, shall we proceed to take the chamber?" asked 'Canarmee, who was gingerly holding his two Plasma Rifles after a recent overheat. The Master Chief nodded his silent approval, and 'Canarmee began to issue orders to his band of warriors.

"You four Grunts," he said, nodding towards the four Grunts hefting Fuel Rod Guns. "Take up positions around the door so you will have a clear field of fire into the prison chamber. That goes the same for you Hunters. All Elites-and you, Demon-

"The name's not 'Demon.' It's 'Master Chief' or 'Chief' to you, 'Canarmee," interrupted the Chief, obviously more used to being called by his military title instead of "Demon," or the name that his parents had given him, for that matter-"John."

"Very well, \_Master Chief\_,," repeated 'Canarmee with mock respect. "As I was saying, all Elites, the Master Chief, and the remaining Grunts will hold position behind the four Grunts with Fuel Rod Guns and the Hunters, but as soon as the return fire thickens, you have permission to move in. But let those in the front hit the Brutes and Jackals with some Fuel Rod shots first to, as you say, 'soften them up.' We should catch them by surprise, since some of them appeared to

be sleeping."

The Elites growled throatily in approval and the Grunts began to chatter amongst themselves yet again. The Master Chief gave no sign of approval or disapproval, probably as retribution for the disrespect 'Canarmee showed him. He merely took up a position and dropped to one knee, ready to fire.

The Hunters stomped closer to the door. They leveled their Fuel Rod Guns at the door, but 'Canarmee waved a four-fingered hand at them.

"Stop! We need your Fuel Rod Guns at full charge when the door is blown open, not at minimal charge. These doors should be taken care of with a few plasma grenades." With that, he activated one of the explosive devices and threw it at the door. His Elites activated and threw their grenades as well. They went off, one by one, in explosions of brilliant neon light. The last grenade was enough to force the battered doors inwards and give the Hunters and Fuel Rod-wielding Grunts a clear shot into the room.

Dull green light filled the air as the Grunts and Hunters fired. The beams from the Hunters cut a swath of death and destruction through a file of five Brutes who had been lounging in a corner. The five Brutes slumped down, minus their heads and upper torsos which had been completely vaporized by the beams. The slower shots fired by the Grunts detonated in a group of Jackals, spraying the area with twisted chunks of metal that were once Plasma Pistols, bits of flesh and internal organs, but mostly blood, which didn't look out of place due to the amount of blood spilled by the executed POWs.

The Grunts and Hunters fired another few volleys. By now the Covenant forces were well aware of the threat and had either taken cover or dodged out of the way, firing their weapons blindly at the door. It did serve as a good distraction, however, as the ex-Covenant soldiers and the Master Chief stormed into the chamber, throwing plasma grenades and raking the area with fire to further cover their entrance.

As soon as the last grenade exploded, taking a Jackal with it, the Brutes quickly began a counterattack. An unfortunate member of the Spec Ops Grunts who carried a Fuel Rod Gun took three Brute Shot grenades to the face, which penetrated his silver-gray armor and killed the Grunt with shrapnel. 'Canarmee stepped over the body and hosed the Brute who fired the shot with both his Plasma Rifles, directing the bursts of plasma towards the simian creature's head. The Brute dropped with a charred and blackened remnant of a head.

The Chief hurriedly stowed his Carbine in his armor's primary weapons container on his back and scooped up the Fuel Rod Gun dropped by the dead Grunt. He pilfered a few of the five-rod ammunition clips from the Grunt's corpse and hefted the weapon up to his shoulder. It was comparable to a human Rocket Launcher in terms of weight and size, and though it lacked the rocket's speed, homing abilities, and had less power, the Fuel Rod Gun held more than double the shots that the human M19 could.

With that in mind, the Master Chief took aim at a Brute and squeezed the weapon's firing stud. The Covenant soldier saw the bolt of

radioactive energy coming at him and hastily ducked behind a crate. The Fuel Rod shot hit the crate, shattering it and creating an impromptu fragmentation grenade as shrapnel thudded into everything in a three-meter-radius, including the Brute that had been hiding behind it.

Checking the indicator on his HUD, which was capable of interfacing with Covenant weapons, the Chief saw he had two shots left, quickly used them to dispose of some Jackals who were advancing under the cover of their shields, and hastily shoved a fresh clip in. Trying to ignore the row of mutilated Elites staring unseeingly at him to his left, the Spartan braced the Fuel Rod Gun against his shoulder, and sighted through its unfamiliar alien magnification system. He was just about to fire when the buzzing of Drones caused him to look up instinctively.

The Master Chief held the Fuel Rod Gun easily in one hand, dropping it to waist level and used his other hand to grab one Needler out of its side holster. He aimed in the general direction of one Drone and unleashed a stream of the faintly purple shards at the hapless Drone. The Chief quickly ducked behind a pillar as the Drone literally exploded in a column of purple flame, throwing its thick white blood all over the floor. He jumped out from his cover, raising the Fuel Rod Gun in his right hand. The Spartan pointed it at a Brute and squeezed its firing stud, which jolted his arm backwards painfully. Immediately, he dropped the weapon and swiftly drew out his other Needler.

Not even bothering to aim well, the Master Chief poured fire up at the Drones who clung to the ceiling, harassing the Elites and Grunts with plasma and Needler fire. The crystalline needles homed in on their targets, who attempted to fly away but instead screeched in pain as the needles punctured their skin and exploded.

Satisfied that the airborne threat had been dealt with, at least for the moment, the Spartan looked down to see the results of his final Fuel Rod shot. The Brute he had fired at seemed to have poor reflexes, because it was lying in two pieces on the floor, its chest utterly destroyed by the highly explosive radioactive shot.

Another Brute gave a roar typical of a very angry member of its species.

"Watch it, he's going to charge," said the Chief calmly over his helmet's external speakers as he drew out his Carbine and made ready to fire.

True to the Master Chief's words, the Brute ripped off his helmet and threw it away in a rage, charging at a distracted Elite who was busy turning Jackals into blackened bodies with his Plasma Rifles. The Chief shouted out a warning and raised his Carbine, but the Elite shifted to open fire on the Brute and blocked the Spartan's line of fire.

Cursing beneath his breath, the Chief strafed to his left, trying to get a shot in. But he was too late. The Brute slammed into the Elite, whose Plasma Rifles had just overheated. The Elite stumbled back, his shield flaring and dimming as the force of the Brute's charge nearly wiped it out. He whacked the Brute with a smoking Plasma Rifle, stunning the creature for a brief second.

The silver-armored Elite dropped his Plasma Rifles and went for his Carbine, grabbing it and firing five shots straight into the Brute's chest. The Brute, who was still carrying his Brute Shot, took the shots as if they were whispers in the wind, and simply whipped the weapon he was carrying out along the Elite's chest with bayonet edge out. Propelled by the Brute's massive strength, which exceeded that of an Elite or a Spartan, the razor-sharp blade on the Brute Shot cut through what remain of the Elite's shield and sliced a long gash through his foe's chestplate. The Elite stumbled back, dropping his Carbine and clutching his chest in pain.

The Master Chief, and 'Canarmee, who had seen his comrade in peril, both pulled the triggers of their Carbines simultaneously, firing the semi-automatic weapons as fast as they could. The green Carbine projectiles filled the air, puncturing the Brute's hide. Holes of ragged skin and fur appeared in the barbaric creature, but still it shrugged off the damage and readied for another charge. 'Canarmee primed and threw a plasma grenade, which flew straight and true to attach itself to the Brute's leg.

The Brute looked down, dumbly comprehending its fate, before the device exploded. Dark blue blood sprayed along the ground, staining the Master Chief's boots. He gave a mental shrug, reloaded his Carbine, and moved to cover the wounded Elite-wounded or dead, he couldn't tell. He sent ten rounds streaming into a Jackal's shield, overloading it and killing the Jackal. The overcharged Plasma Pistol in the vulture-like alien's hand discharged, decapitating a Grunt even as the Jackal's corpse tumbled backwards.

By now most of the Covenant forces had been killed or incapacitated; an Elite had pinned a struggling Jackal to the floor and was holding the Jackal down with one hand and firing his Needler with the other. The last Brute left standing took a volley of needles to the chest. They exploded and the Brute dropped like a sack of potatoes.

All around the room, bodies were draped on the floors, leaning against pillars or walls, or stacked on top of each other. Everywhere the Master Chief looked, there was carnage, whether it was a group of Brutes killed by Carbine shots to the head or a pile of tangled Elite corpses, executed by the Brutes.

He tore his gaze away from the dead aliens, his eyes coming to rest on 'Canarmee. The Spec Ops Elite was crouching down next to the Elite that had been slashed by a Brute Shot. 'Canarmee shook his head, which told the Chief that the Elite on the ground was dead.

In all, one Elite and six Grunts had died in the rescue mission. Another Elite, 'Nolsamee, had been badly wounded. A Jackal had hit him with an overcharged Plasma Pistol blast, taking out his shields, and a Brute fired a set of Carbine shots. They penetrated his left leg's armor plate before the Elite stuck a plasma grenade to the Brute's arm. Now, limping about, he was sure to be more of a liability than an asset in any major engagement. Still, on the upside, the advantage of the Hunters and the element of surprise had kept casualties reasonably low.

The surviving members of the rescue team went about freeing the Spec Ops troops being held prisoner. They numbered twenty-five in all, seven Elites and eighteen Grunts. The liberated prisoners picked up

weapons from the various bodies lying around the room. The Master Chief watched as the former prisoners pried some equipment crates open, and found what appeared to be rations inside. Having been starved by their cruel guards for over a week, they leapt on the food, quickly devouring most of it within minutes.

As the remainder of the prisoners rested a while after their ordeal, 'Canarmee and the Spartan were holding a quiet conference in the corner.

"Not enough. Not nearly enough," said 'Canarmee in frustration, indicating that the amount of prisoners rescue wouldn't have a chance if they attempted to take the ship's bridge.

For once, the Master Chief's fertile mind had run out of ideas. "Thenâ€¦|what will we do? We have no other options."

'Canarmee grabbed an Energy Sword from a nearby rack and activated it. He held the elegant blade, capable of cutting through several feet of any known armor, close to his face.

"Then we shall attempt it anyway. We'll give them a battle that will be remembered for ages to come!" the Elite said, a glimmer of the Elites' old pride showing in his eyes.

"If there's anyone left to remember," replied the Chief grimly. "If we failâ€¦|" He left the sentence unfinished.

'Canarmee's shoulders drooped as he realized the truth of the human's words. The Elites had always considered dying to be an honor, but now that they were no longer part of the Covenant, their viewpoints on the matter had quickly changed. He deactivated his sword and hooked it onto his belt. "What shall we do, if we cannot attack?"

The Master Chief shrugged as best as he could in the armor. "That's what I asked you." He sighed, looking around at the Elites, Grunts, and Hunters scattered about the room. Then he saw it. A small grate, positioned a quarter of the way up the wall to the left of the door.

'Canarmee saw the Chief staring at the grate and came to the same conclusion that the Spartan had.

"If that grate is connected to a pipe networkâ€¦|" started the Chief.

"â€¦|then we could drop straight into the bridge and capture Truth," finished 'Canarmee.

They both glanced at each other, analyzing the possible consequences of what they considered a crazy, even suicidal plan. However, they reached a silent agreement to proceed with it. The two warriors had no other choice.

"There must be an easier way to get myself killed," muttered the Chief under his breath. "But it's all part of the job. 'Canarmee, you inform our troops of ourâ€¦|method of entering the bridge. I will remove the grate and rig up a series of cables for the Elites and Grunts to climb up. The Hunters will have to stay here."

'Canarmee nodded and was just about to complete his task when he hesitated. "Supposing the pipes don't lead to the ship's Control Room?"

The Spartan hesitated, too. "That's a chance we'll just have to take."

The Elite snorted, sighed, and went on to speak to his soldiers. The Chief ripped open Covenant crate after Covenant crate, looking for what he needed most. Finally, he found it—a container full of thick rope-like objects that glowed a faint green and had metal attachments on one end. These strange implements were the alien equivalent of grappling hooks. He slung five over his shoulder and strode quickly over to the section of wall that contained the grate.

Casting the first grappling hook accurately, he managed to get it caught on one of the bars of the grate. He gave it a yank, but the metal remained embedded in the sides of the hole that it blocked. The Chief gave another jerk, putting much more strength behind it this time. The grate clattered to the floor, and the string of the grappling hook dropped to the deck as well.

The Master Chief tossed the other four hooks into the opening he had created. They attached themselves firmly to the ancient stone-like walls that the Forerunners had built. The Chief tested one to make sure it would hold. Then, satisfied, he turned to face the assembled ranks of ten Elites and twenty-four Grunts, all veteran Spec Ops troops wearing heavy armor and trained with the best techniques that the aliens had to offer.

'Canarmee stepped forward to the line of four grappling hooks that hung down from the vent hole. "Shall we, Master Chief?" he said courteously, quite different from his initial disdain for the human after seeing the Spartan in combat. The Elite was gnawing on his lower mandibles in anticipation of a good fight and gripping the hilt of his sword, ready to activate it at the first sign of trouble.

A sudden humorous thought flashed unbidden into the Chief's mind, a popular joke among the Marines and ODSTS. Normally the Master Chief wasn't one for humor, but he decided it out for once. He smirked under his visor, and said, "Ladies first."

**\*\*\_Final Note:** Still undecided about the romance thing. It's pretty much half and half. Final decision will come later—though it'll be hard.\_\*\*

## 8. Earthbound

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\_\*\*A/N:\*\*** I'm going to capitalize all weapon names, soldier ranks, etc. just for the sake of uniformity. Also, there's going to be more action than anything else for the next few chapters as the battle for Earth unfolds, but I'll get on to the meaty plot elements afterwards, don't worry. By the way, my Cancun trip was nice, but I was dragged on too many tours and didn't get to buy much. Sorry if that got in the way of this chapter, but I'll try to catch up. Honestly.\_



**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_pzgr6: Muhuahua, yes, write more! And yep, schoolwork sucks. At least I don't have as much work as high schoolâ€|yet.  
:cowers:\_

\_Master Chief's Biatch: As always, help is much appreciated. Thanks for the offer.\_

\_Khellendros: Hmm. Sounds familiar? Dunno, it was a random idea of mine. Perhaps it has shown up elsewhere as well.\_

\_Jounouchi Katsuya: Sorry, I don't know much about Predators, but I've read quite a few fics with Halo/Predator crossovers. I recommend Obsidian Thirteen.\_

\_YamiPaladinofChaos: Yes, ladies first. C'mon, even in war we gotta have manners.\_

\_ryu isaac: Yep, I reviewed your story, and nah, asking for advice isn't a bad thing, it's good actually. Don't worry about it.\_

\_Zerath: Sorry to say, but the final fight won't be coming for a long timeâ€|this is gonna be novel length and that fight is going to be near the end. Ahh, I give away too much:bangs head on keyboard:\_

\_nightdragon0: Yeah, it must be. Too bad it's going to be a while before we stop shooting at the Elites by accident. Just kiddingâ€|\_

\_Blitz Kitsune: Yes, I have read First Strike before, and I know that some Spartans are still alive, but I said **\*\*most\*\*** Spartans were KIA, not **\*\*all\*\*** of them.\_

\_NuclearMage: My bad, I forgot to clarify the fact that Mars is now a smoking, charred floating remnant of its former self. And, as for the issue with Reachâ€|I think a lot of soldiers know, one way or another. Why else the Marines say "That's for Reach, you bastards!" when they kill some Covenant in Halo 2? Still, I should've clarified that too.\_

\_goldfish demon: Don't know yet, probably characters of my invention.\_

\_Tamarallion Arothlin: Wow, that's a long review. Ha, that's why I'm putting down a personal response here. Thanks for the advice on romance, too.\_

\_BrendantheJedi: Hey, I didn't say anything about leaving the Spartans outâ€|but you'll have to wait a while to see them.\_

\_zeldaâ€"lover: FYI, Johnson has a wife, as you will discover if you have the Limited Collector's Edition of Halo 2 and have read the excerpts from "Conversations from the Universe." Also I don't want to do something with Keyes because of her rank. I feel it would be more interesting to be among the enlisted ranks or NCOs. I mean, romance in a combat situation has been used before (I think) but in a command

situation, it would seem out of place to be. That's just my POV.\_

\_appledude211: Hmmâ€|lots of people asking for Spartan romance. All right, maybe I'll add something between the Spartans, maybe not intense romanceâ€"just a show of caring or something, because even a sense a caring is relatively rare among the Spartans. And, like I said to BrendantheJedi, the others are coming.\_

\_corkscrew737: See my response to zeldaâ€"lover.\_

\_elitegruntâ€"117: You'll just have to wait to see what happens. I've given away too much already, sorry.\_

\_Much thanks to everyone listed above! You are not neglected just because I didn't say "thanks" in the personal response!\_

\_Shout outs to everyone else who reviewed: keystone, Ultra Sonikku, timthesoulmantaylor, Fhulhi the Crazy, Brian, Warrior, Elijah, psyche, and virtualâ€"reality, thanks for the support, compliments, and reviews!\_

**\*\*Chapter 7: Earthbound\*\***

**\*\*2210 hours, February 21, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
\*\*\*Elite destroyer \_Duty and Honor\_, uncharted Delta Halo system.\*\***

For the second time in his long and decorated military career, Sergeant Avery J. Johnson was scared. The first time, he had made the first encounter with the Flood on Halo 04 and had nearly been infected. Now, he stared into an army of the living deadâ€"he couldn't count how many Combat and Carrier Forms there were arrayed in front of him.

The Sergeant's face was devoid of fear, however, as he emptied his Carbine's magazine into the wave of Combat Forms that had just leaped into the air. However, out of that mob of forty forms, only two of them dropped. He stepped back to reload as the special combat team opened up on the grotesque bipeds hurtling through the air. Half of them were ripped apart before their feet even touched the ground. The other half smashed into the deckplates, denting the metallic plates with a dull \_clang\_ that was lost amid the chaos of battle.

The twenty or so Combat Forms, all converted Elites, were just beginning to recover from their long jump when the Hunters opened fire on them. The beams they fired went straight through the exâ€"Elites and to the ones still standing several meters behind them. More packed in to fill the gaps in the Flood ranks, and they sprayed the Alliance combat team with their stolen plasma weapons.

A few of the unshielded Grunts were wounded as the plasma bolts burned through their armor to the flesh within. However, the Elites and ODSs unleashed a fresh wave of their own plasma, bullets, and grenades, causing random limbs and appendages of Combat Forms to fly through the air. The Arbiter fired his dual Plasma Rifles until their side flaps opened to dump waste heat, not before baking a lone Combat Form to a crisp. 'Vadumee and 'Sonamee fought backâ€"toâ€"back, both using the elegant yet deadly Energy Swords to take a Combat Form out of commission with a single swipe.

Even though Combat Forms were being killed left and right, there were still hundreds packed in the hallway. They charged continually and there was no break in the wall of attackers. Already some Grunts had fallen, and some Elites had been wounded. The Hunters were directed to move in front of the softer Grunts, so they could take the Flood assault on their shields and nearâ€œimpregnable armor.

Johnson crouched down to minimize his profile and fired his Carbine carefully, aiming for the chest portion of the exâ€œElites that housed the Infection Forms. As he had discovered earlier, hitting the Infection Form that controlled its host's motor functions would quickly disable the Combat Form as a whole. To him, it was as natural to do as headshots with a sniper.

Viscous green blood sprayed as the Sergeant put another Combat Form out of commission. Ejecting the spent clip in his Carbine and slapping another one in, he zoomed in with the weapon's 2x magnification system to allow for easier "Flood headshots," as he mentally nicknamed them.

Flood forms rushed the combat team in a mindless torrent, regardless of how many of them died from attempting the same exact method of attacking their enemies. The infected forms fired Plasma Rifles and Needlers which their hosts had used, but since the fire was not concentrated it didn't cause much harm to the Alliance soldiers. Carrier Forms waddled around, detonating at random as Alliance soldiers fired on them. The explosions usually ended up killing more of their own than their enemies.

The Arbiter's Plasma Rifles began another cooldown cycle from the constant fire he had been putting out. Impatiently, he tossed them away, drew his Energy Sword, lunged forward, and cut a Combat Form in half in one graceful movement. The insides of the bisected Combat Form leaked out onto his hands. He shook the viscera off and proceeded to end another Flood form's life.

'Sonamee and the Spec Ops Commander took a brief rest from cutting apart Combat Forms, unsheathing their Carbines and using those to pick off Flood from a distance.

This repetitive cycle of Flood rushing and being killed in most imaginable ways went on for quite some time. The Alliance soldiers were taking virtually no casualties, due to the foolishness of their adversaries and the narrow hall which prevented them from being swamped.

Sergeant Johnson reloaded his Covenant Carbine again, noting the fact that he only had three magazines remaining. Empty clips lay all around him, and the bodies of Combat Forms were also covering the deck in front of him. The Sergeant's motion tracker showed a solid wall of red contacts in front, but that was obvious as the Flood were filling the entire section in front of him.

Impassively, the hardened warrior lifted the Carbine to his shoulder and continued to decimate the endless ranks of Combat Forms. As of yet, most of the forms were Elites, though a few infected humans were scattered among them, presumably from the In Amber Clad that the Flood had commandeered. Bodies tumbled and fell from the sustained fire he put out, but the holes he made in the wall of Flood were soon

plugged up by more of the loathsome beasts.

The Alliance troops continued to pour fire at the mass of Flood forms, coordinating their fire in groups. As one group's weapons would overheat or require reloading, the next would step up. The method was quite ancient, dating back to the human medieval period when ranks of archers used the same strategy.

The Arbiter linked up with the other leaders, including 'Sonamee, 'Vadumee, and Johnson. All were covered in Flood blood and gore, including random limbs and tentacles.

"We can't hold them off forever," yelled Johnson over the clamor of battle, pausing to slam his last Carbine magazine home and pick off a charging Combat Form. "It may have seemed easy in the beginning, but our weapons are going to run out of ammo and battery soon."

As if to emphasize his point, the commander of the group of Elites that had just stepped back from the battle, a Major Elite, strode up to 'Vadumee, tossing away his empty Needlers and drawing a Plasma Sword. Blood flowed from a gash across his chest, where a Combat Form had punctured his chest armor with a tentacle slash. He gave his report, panting slightly from the battle.

"Excellency, the weapons that my troops are using are beginning to run dry. And, judging by the fact that the Flood are pushing us farther and farther back along this corridor, it seems that others are encountering the same problem. What are we to do? Eventually we'll be forced back into the main chamber of this level. It is too spacious; once there, there will be nothing stopping the Flood from making a mass charge and overwhelming us."

The Spec Ops Commander shook his head despairingly. "As of now, there is not much we can do." The deck rattled, interrupting the Commander as the Hunters stepped up to take the fight to the enemy. The battle turned in favor of the Alliance for a brief moment, before a rocket streaked out from the Flood ranks, hitting a Hunter deadâ€"on and splattering some horrified Grunts with bright orange blood. Quickly, an ODSF fired a set of Battle Rifle shots that killed the launcherâ€"wielding Combat Form, but the damage was done.

'Vadumee clicked his upper mandibles, which meant a human biting his lip in frustration. "Perhaps we can send in a call for reinforcements, if there are any more warriors aboard this ship," he suggested halfheartedly.

"We have very few available, due to the casualties we sustained while wiping the Brute vermin off this ship," 'Sonamee said regretfully. "What soldiers we have left are mostly stationed on guard duty. I will pull together as many as I can to assist us." The Elite turned away as he sent a transmission to his warriors.

"Well, in the meantime, I guess we'd better get back to work," muttered Johnson. Rejoining the ranks, he used the last of his Carbine rounds to save some Grunts from being mangled by two Combat Forms.

Discarding the empty weapon, the Sergeant unlimbered the MA5B Assault Rifle he had holstered on his back. It was an interesting story as to how he acquired the outdated rifle. The Commander of the \_Duty and

Honor\_, 'Sonamee, had been in several Covenant ground ops. On a battle on the human world of Leviâ€Civita, he had led the Covenant forces to victory, and kept a Marine's rifle as a battle trophy and memento of it. He displayed it on a pedestal, along with twelve magazines for it arrayed around the rifle.

At times he even wore it at his side while in command of the \_Duty and Honor\_, even though most Covenant looked upon human weapons as inferior trash. 'Sonamee liked the feel of the Assault Rifle, and never abhorred the humans as the other Elites did. The Elite would only kill because those were the orders of his superiors, and always thought there was something not quite right about the High Prophets' teachings. Now, he had presented the rifle complete with ammunition to Johnson as a small token of his sorrow for murdering so many of the Sergeant's brothersâ€Cinâ€Carms during his military career.

Now, as he gripped the familiar curves of the MA5B, Sergeant Johnson was glad to have it. Sure, Battle Rifles and SMGs were nice and slightly more advanced weapons. However, though the BR55's 9.5mm rounds packed a bigger punch and was more accurate than the MA5B, there was no selector switch; the Battle Rifle was only capable of threeâ€Croundâ€Cburst fire. This, combined with a smaller, 36â€Cround magazine compared to the Assault Rifle's 60, made the BR55 considerably less effective against the Flood. And the SMG, though it had a 60â€Cround clip as well, had to be dualâ€Cwielded for power because of its relatively weak 5mm rounds, and dualâ€Cwielding doubled reload time.

Johnson slipped his hand onto the handle of the Assault Rifle, chambered a round, and squeezed the rifle's trigger. He felt a sense of satisfaction as the rifle spit bullets and rumbled against his shoulder. The Sergeant directed the fire at a Combat Form and fired thirty rounds of full automatic into the hapless exâ€CElite. A smile quirked up a corner of his mouth as the beast flopped dead in a pool of its own gore.

Meanwhile, the ODSTs were in combat with a particularly determined mass of Flood, assisted by ten Spec Ops Elites. Both squads of expert soldiers, human and Elite, cut through their enemies with anything and everything they had. However, even the best of the best weren't of much use if their weapons were empty. All of the warriors were using their secondary weapons by this time, and those were running low as well.

Helljumper Private First Class Derek Knight stood shoulderâ€Ctoâ€Cshoulder with an Elite in the midst of this squad. The two were scything through various Flood forms with the combined power of Knight's Shotgun and the Elite's Energy Sword, arguably the two most effective weapons against the Flood. Private Knight was pausing to reload and had just slipped the first eightâ€Cgauge shell into the Shotgun's receiver when three Combat Forms leapt at him and his partner.

The Combat Form flying through the air seemed different to the Private. It was bulkier and more muscular than any form he had previously seen, and its head wasn't like that of an Elite's or human's. Its skin was darker than the typical sickly green of the Flood and had an almost furry texture to it. \_Well, it's going to die all the same,\_ he thought.

As soon as the first form landed with a \_thud\_ in front of Knight, the ODSF quickly pulled the pin on one of his frag grenades and tossed it in the general vicinity of the Combat Form. There was a flash, a column of flame and shrapnel that the Flood form disappeared in. Knight was shocked at the sight he saw through the clearing smoke. Rather than flop dead as it should have, the monstrosity just staggered for a moment and stumbled backwards, even though its lower body was badly mutilated.

The Elite next to Knight stepped up and ran another one of the strange Combat Forms through the chest with his sword, and pulled the weapon out with a squelch. This time, the only result was the appearance of a gaping hole in its chest, and the beast momentarily stopped in its charge, but refused to die.

Knight hurriedly shoved shells into his Shotgun, backing up slightly to gain more time. The Combat Form he had grenaded ran towards him with limbs flailing, and he put three shotgun blasts into it. The parasite-controlled beast finally fell under the barraged of eight-gauge buckshot, though it made an effort to stand back up before a fourth shotgun shell finally killed the Infection Form within. Strangely, judging by the area where its tentacles were jutting out, the parasite had taken up residence inside its host's stomach region, or what would've been the stomach region if the host was a human.

\_Still, why the hell didn't the shotgun pellets kill it?\_ Knight wondered. \_That sonuvabitch thing, whatever it is, must have a really thick hide.\_ Looking up, the Helljumper saw the Elite he had been fighting with finally dispatch his foe with a series of sword cuts.

"Look out!" Knight yelled as the third of the bizarre Combat Forms came up behind the Elite. The alien warrior turned just in time for the Combat Form to lash out a tentacle, hitting the Elite with a harsh \_crack\_. The force of the blow knocked out the Elite's shields immediately and sent the alien spinning to the ground.

"Take this, you bastard!" The Private charged, then skidded to a halt, brought his Shotgun up to his shoulder and fired point-blank into the lumbering Combat Form. Swiftly Knight pumped another round into the chamber and fired again. The low booming of the Shotgun was drowned out as the Combat Form gave an unearthly death scream, then slumped down with most of its upper torso torn apart by the eight-gauge shot.

The Helljumper hesitated for a brief second, then knelt down next to the Elite and dragged him back to a safer location behind the front Alliance ranks. A week ago, he would've shot the alien in the head without a second thought. In fact, he had come close to doing that during the early times of the alliance with the former Covenant soldiers. Now, however, he checked to see if the Elite was still alive.

It turned out that the Spec Ops soldier was just unconscious. Had Knight not yelled out a warning, however, the Combat Form would've cracked the Elite's spine. The Elite's chestplate was fractured and there he was bleeding slightly, but there was no life-threatening damage as far as Knight could tell. The Elite groaned, indicating that he was coming around.

"Take it easy," advised the ODST. "You took a nasty hit there, from whatever that thing was. I think some of your ribs might be broken, but you might want a medic to look you overâ€¦if you have any medics, that is."

The Elite nodded. "I thank you for your assistance, human. I am in your debt, but I hope there will come a time and place where I will have the chance to repay you." The alien dragged himself up, clutching his chest, but not giving any other sign that he was in pain.

\_Typical Elite bravado,\_ Knight mused, having been briefed before on how the Elites were very proud and committed warriors. He watched the Elite stagger to a group of whiteâ€¦"armored Grunts, who proceeded to patch the wounded soldier up.

\_Now I've seen it allâ€¦medic Grunts. \_Knight paused guiltily in his thoughts. \_What am I doing, standing around? I'd better get back to fighting, and whatever that Combat Form was, it was damn tough. I'd better warn the other Alliance guys about it before somebody else meets our new friends.\_ However, before he could open up a COM channel, a scream reached his ears over the continuing clash of battle. A scream from a familiar voiceâ€¦"a human one.

\_God, that's Private Bradley! Damnâ€¦not him!\_ The Helljumper took off towards the direction of the scream, making sure his Shotgun was fully loaded. To his surprise, another Spec Ops Elite started running with him. As he dashed to save his comrade, Knight glanced at the Elite questioningly. The Elite couldn't see the Helljumper's face due to his helmet visor, but interpreted the human's question anyway.

"You saved one of my brothers, human, and now I shall help save one of yours," was all that the Elite said. Knight nodded in appreciation, elbowed a few Grunts out of his way, and saw what had caused the scream.

Elsewhere, Johnson had just blown the limbs off of a Combat Form with his Assault Rifle when an alarm sounded in his helmet. A screen showing squad status popped up in the lowerâ€¦"left corner of his HUD, which showed the biosigns, location, rank, etc. of each ODST squad member. As he watched, the list automatically scrolled to \_Pvt. Bradley, C\_. Bradley's biosign indicator flashed red, and Johnson knew the trooper was in grave danger. He turned until the arrow next to Bradley's name was pointing straight forward, and dashed off.

Private Knight neared to see another one of the new Combat Forms standing over a Helljumper, holding a Brute Plasma Rifle. The hunchbacked beast was just about to fire when Private Knight cut its plans short with a 3.5" shell to its stomach area. The Combat Form dropped like a rock, the Infection Form inside literally torn apart by the cone of Shotgun pellets. The Elite that had he had been running with provided covering fire with his two Needlers. Without pause, Private Knight removed the fallen Helljumper's helmet and felt his neck for a pulse.

He found none. The ODST had suffered the fate that Knight had saved the Elite fromâ€¦"a broken spine. The Private hung his head in sorrow

for his fallen brethren and closed the Helljumper's stillâ€œopen eyes. He was jolted out of his reverie when another "normal" Combat Form charged him. The Marine ducked just in time as the creature's tentacles lashed out. He put a Shotgun shell into its chest, dropping the beast, and quickly dragged the other Helljumper's body behind the lines as he had done with the wounded Elite.

Once he was behind the thin line of Alliance troops once more, he grabbed the dead soldier's dog tags and tucked them away in an empty suit pocket. Knight propped his friend's body against a wall, keeping it safe from the Floodâ€œif any of us are safe from them,â€ he thought bitterly. He stood and reloaded his Shotgun, looking up to see Sergeant Johnson approaching.

Johnson jerked his head towards Bradley's body. "He's dead, son?"

Knight swallowed a lump in his throatâ€œyou're a soldier, dammit, at least act like it\_â€ and nodded. "Yes, sir."

Johnson sighed, then knelt down next to the corpse, looking for dog tags. Finding none, he looked to Knight and understood where they had gone. "Take it easy, son," he said, guessing that the Marine had just lost a friend. "This is war. We always lose buddies and make some sacrifices. God knows how many I've lost." He paused for a moment, then continued. "Come on, soldier. You're an ODST, tough as nails. Are you gonna crack and go soft on me now?"

The Helljumper glanced at his friend's body, and his gaze snapped back to Johnson's visor, which was glowing in the beam of light Knight's suit was emitting. "Sir, no sir!" he announced, pumping his Shotgun to emphasize his point. "Just ready to kill some Flood and get revenge, Sarge."

Johnson's eyes hardened, but of course Knight couldn't see that. "Kill, yes. Revenge, noâ€œthis war isn't about revenge. It's about winning. If I'd been going for revenge for all the friends I've lost, I would've been dead by now. Just stay focused." An explosion rocked the deck between the two Marines. "Too much chitâ€œchat gets you killed. Let's just earn our pay, soldier."

The Helljumper saluted and took up his position in the Alliance defensive line. Johnson reloaded his Assault Rifle, pulled the charging lever back and stepped back into place as well, next to the Arbiter.

"Avoiding the fight, Johnson?" the Arbiter mocked, grunting as he cut apart some Infection Forms with his sword.

Johnson snorted. "Huh, as if! I'd probably see you Elites turning tail and running with your asses on fire before Sergeant Johnson backs away from a fight." He sidestepped a Combat Form that had vaulted towards him, shoved his MA5B into its back and fired. A hole appeared in the Combat Form's front as the armorâ€œpiercing bullets cut through it.

The Arbiter didn't reply and merely continued making mincemeat out of the mindlessly charging Flood horde. Johnson killed a pair of Carrier Forms, slapped a full clip into his rifle, and popped the pods spawned by the carriers. He turned his attention to a human Combat



Form that had just slaughtered a Grunt squad with a Shotgun, killed the beast and the Infection Form that tried to dive into the Combat Form's chest and "revive" it.

Suddenly, his squad monitor beeped a warning again. This time, two of the Helljumpers' names were flashing a crimson warning. Once again, the Sergeant turned to the source of the commotion and ran to assist the ODSs.

Five of the bizarre new Combat Forms stood over the two Helljumpers, who lay on the floor in a pool of red blood. With his practiced eye, Johnson surveyed the scene before charging in. Both Helljumpers had burns covering their suits, indicating that they had been hit with plasma fire, and the five Combat Forms held plasma weapons"so that made sense. He fired a few rounds to goad them charging him, then hurled three plasma grenades towards the creatures.

The grenades were thrown with great accuracy, each finding a form and adhering to it. The Combat Forms disappeared in a brilliant sapphire flash. Four were reduced to green dust and floating fragments of skin, the fifth body was thrown forwards to Johnson's feet. He backed up, pulling the carcass of the Combat Form and the Helljumpers using his suit"enhanced strength, and took few seconds to have a look at the new enemy.

He noticed many of the same differences as Private Knight had, but he also recognized the head of the beast, even though it was slightly disfigured from the grenade blast. The head seemed small in comparison to the hulking, muscular body, had small beady eyes, and a vaguely simian look. It was an infected Brute.

A chill swept through Johnson's body. \_Those Brutes were as strong as a Combat Form before they got infected. I don't want to know how much muscle they got now they've been taken over by those damned parasites.\_

Regardless, the Sergeant kicked the infected Brute's chest in, making it useless from the Flood's standpoint. He noticed that the two Helljumpers' names had been grayed"out in his squad display, and knew they were dead. Johnson took the dog tags from the dead soldiers, rested the bodies up against the wall where Private Bradley lay, and shook his head sadly.

Tearing his gaze away from the three dead ODSs, he hit his rifle's magazine release and slapped a fresh one into the receiver. Stepping over a batch of dead Grunts, he began to fire upon the Flood again with surgical precision, dropping five Combat Forms in quick succession by killing their Infection Forms.

"Squad! Regroup around me!" he barked into the squad COM channel. Johnson hoped that fighting in a group would prevent any more human casualties in the battle, if they were to win it at all. He rolled to one side as a volley of needles whizzed past, then put another Combat Form down by cutting off its legs with armor"piercing rounds.

Looking behind him, the Sergeant saw the hallway open up into a huge chamber that they had passed through before meeting the Flood, a mere ten meters from where the Alliance were holding position now. He knew that if the Alliance strike team was forced back into the cavernous

room, then they were finished. The Marine noticed the surviving Helljumpers approaching on his motion tracker, rapped out a quick order for the squad to reform up front, as Johnson was slightly behind the bulk of the action.

The Arbiter, 'Vadumee, and 'Sonamee were helping their Elites create an impromptu wall by piling the countless bodies of Flood Combat Forms as a barrier. A fanatical group of Elites with swords met the Flood headâ€"on to create a distraction for the workers. The Arbiter would've joined them, but his own sword had very little energy remaining. The Elite grunted as he lifted two bodies, setting them down around one of the four remaining Hunters. This would protect the nearâ€"invincible Hunter from the "Hunter-killer": Rocket Launchers and Fuel Rod Guns.

Johnson and his ODS Ts arrived to helped stack up the bodies. There was no shortage of the Flood corpses, so before long a solid barricade of the dead was in place along the width of the hallway. An ODS T was grabbing one last dead Combat Form when it rose and struck him in the chest. The Marine reeled backwards, shields flaring. The Helljumper managed to bring his Shotgun up and kill the beast, and the squad medic came over to patch him up.

The patter of feet behind Sergeant Johnson caused him to turn, and he whirled around, ready to fire. The pugnacious Sergeant barely stopped the impulse to fire when he saw that the feet belonged to twenty or so Spec Ops Commando Elites, their silver armor standing out in the gloom of greenish Flood-infested air. He lowered his rifle and waved the Elites forward gratefully. The Elites nodded to him, a sign that they had somewhat deserted their superior attitude towards other races, and strode onwards.

All of the Commandos carried a heavy assortment of alien weaponry, and at least half of them had portable plasma cannons strapped to their back. They could be deployed quickly and had an incredible fire rate compared to other plasma weapons. It was comparable to the human M297 Squad Automatic Weapon, or SAW, a manâ€"portable LMG with bipod that spewed powerful .30 caliber AP slugs at 800 rounds per minute from a 250â€"round belt. It required barely any setup time at all if the user chose to fire with the bipod, but also could be fired without setup because of its cleverly built design. Johnson briefly wished he had an M297 on hand, then tossed the worthless thought aside.

The Arbiter felt a knock on his shoulder armor and whipped around to see the twenty Commandos arrayed in battle positions. 'Sonamee and 'Vadumee also turned. "So. You are our reinforcements, are you not?" asked the Arbiter, already guessing the answer.

There seemed to be no leader among the Commandos; all were in the same rank level. One of them spoke up nonetheless. "Of course, Excellency. We were notified of your predicament by the Captain of the Guard."

The Spec Ops Commander nodded appreciatively. "We are very grateful to you're your assistance. Many Grunts have fallen already, as well as a significant amount of Elitesâ€"and humans," he added, glancing at the row of three dead Helljumpers. "Those plasma cannons will certainly help in stemming the onslaught of Flood warriors. Set them up along the barricade we have constructed."

The Elites glanced at the wall of bodies, some of which were still oozing blood, and grunted as if this were an everyday occurrence. They propped the plasma cannons up on the makeshift fortification and began showering the Flood with the deadly plasma charges. Row after row of the beasts fell, neat lines stitched across their bodies marking where the Elite gunners had swept the guns along the enemy. Johnson, his Helljumpers, and the other Alliance soldiers opened up as well. Sheets of plasma and bullets ripped through the air, so thick that anyone standing parallel to the Alliance troops' fire would see an almost solid mass of blue plasma and orange projectiles. As if this torrent of destruction wasn't enough, the Hunters fired as well.

It was a while before any Alliance soldier could see the effects of this devastating fusillade, which was, simply put, the utter annihilation of most of the remaining Flood. Once plasma weapons overheated and projectile weapons required a reload, the amount of fire slackened off while the plasma cannons continued firing in staggered groups to prevent them all from overheating simultaneously. The cannons paid the price for their high fire rate with a high overheat rate.

Sergeant Johnson's Assault Rifle's ammunition counter ran down to zero as he dispatched a zealous Combat Form that had risen twice after falling. He threw his last plasma grenade and watched it vaporize a group of unfortunate Carrier Forms. Johnson watched with contentment as the carriers detonated and took even more with them. \_This is more like a spectator sport,\_ he thought as he watched all forms of Flood being cut down like corn before the reaper. Even the new Brute Combat Forms couldn't take the withering amount of fire that the Alliance plasma cannons and smallâ€œarms were producing.

Some human Combat Forms struggled over a mound of dead Flood that had accumulated in a hill of sorts during the course of the battle. Johnson and an Elite gunner promptly cut their plans short with a combination of 7.62mm rounds and an unrelenting barrage of plasma.

With their enemy dropping like flies, Alliance soldiers soon began to take a more relaxed stand towards the fight. The number of active Flood forms was quickly dwindling under the fortified turret positions. Johnson was careful not to relax, as complacency lay on the road to defeat. He ordered his squad to be on alert for something unexpected and they gave affirmative responses. The Sergeant depleted his sixth Assault Rifle clip, ejected it, and put a new one in its place.

However, Johnson let the plasma cannons handle most of the opposition, conserving his ammunition for that unexpected move he felt that the Flood were about to make. His sharp dark eyes darted across the combat zone in front of him, watching and waiting for the slightest change in battle dynamics.

The move came just as Johnson had anticipated. All of the remaining Flood pulled back for a few minutes, congregating near the end of the corridor, and charged the entrenched Alliance team \_en masse\_. Combat Forms led the charge, firing weapons wildly and waving tentacleâ€œcovered limbs. Carrier Forms waddled up behind them, and

crowds of Infection Forms scuttled along the walls and ceiling, heading for their would-be prey.

"Pour it on 'em! Let those slimy bastards have it!" Johnson ordered, and opened fire in a full-automatic spray. The Alliance soldiers fired as one, and the Sergeant could've sworn that the deck rumbled beneath them. Though forms were being slaughtered endlessly, the survivors were not deterred from reaching their goal. Carriers exploded and threw others towards the Alliance, Combat Forms were killed by anything from grenades to misdirected friendly fire. The Sergeant laughed as a Combat Form tripped over another fallen beast and fell into the Energy Sword that it carried.

Twenty, fifteen, ten—as the lingering Flood forms came closer to the barricade, fewer and fewer of them were left standing. Finally, only seven Combat Forms were still on their feet, five meters from the Alliance line. One by one, they were killed off by the accurate fire of their opposition. The final Combat Form, a reanimated Elite, leapt in the air, crashing down right in front of Sergeant Johnson.

The Sergeant pumped forty 7.62mm slugs into the wretched creature, watched it fall, and opened his visor. Oblivious to the foul stench of lifeless Flood that assaulted his nostrils, Johnson jumped onto the wall, spat on the body and shot it again. "And the crowd goes wild! \_That\_, ladies and gentlemen, is how it's \_done\_!" He took off his helmet and whirled it around his head as a euphoric sign of victory.

The Arbiter started to clap suddenly, a gesture of approval that seemed to apply to both Elite and human cultures. The applause grew louder until it filled the narrow hallway. Elites, Grunts, and ODSTs alike celebrated—not only for Johnson, but for their whole cause. Sergeant Johnson took a bow, and stepped down from the Combat Form he was standing on.

'Vadumee strode up to Johnson. "Well done, human, well done indeed! I doubted your abilities, even when the Arbiter had told me you were a formidable fighter. I see that I had made a terrible mistake, however. No, all you of humans should be congratulated for your skill! We fought with unyielding spirit and hatred as enemies. Now, united, we shall be the greatest force the Covenant has ever seen!"

"Amen to that." More cheers and applause followed, quite of style for the stiff-necked demeanor that the humans had come to associate with the Elites. Slowly, the team dispersed, but a token force remained in case any of the bodies came back to life. Later, a disposal unit would be dispatched to cart the bodies off, place them into waste disposal pods, and launch them into space to be vaporized by the ship's plasma torpedoes.

Sergeant Johnson was walking away from the scene of carnage when he passed the three fallen Helljumpers being loaded into slings by their surviving comrades so that they could be saved for a proper military burial, on Earth—if it wasn't turned into a cinder, of course. He paused a moment, watching them.

The Arbiter came to stand beside him. The veteran soldier knew the thoughts that were running through Johnson's mind. "Do not worry

yourself too much, human Johnson. We have all lost brothers today, everyone in this room. And Iâ€"here he broke off, gesturing at the twenty or so Elite bodiesâ€"have lost many more than you on this day."

Johnson knew that the Arbiter was telling the truth, but that wasn't exactly what he had been thinking about. "Yeah, I knowâ€|a lot more of you died today than my Helljumpers. But there are so few of us left." He turned to face the Elite, his unusually bright eyes bleak with a deep sense of grief etched into them. "Listen, I've been in the Corps a long time. I've lost a load of buddies, more than all the Alliance guys that were killed today. Forty, fifty, hell, maybe even a hundred friends I've lost. I don't even know why I'm so caught up now over three dead leathernecks I hardly even knew. But my other friends, they were all fighting and dying against the Covenant, killed for reasons they didn't even know."

He swiped his arm across his face quickly. \_Damn, if some of those buddies could see me now, crying like a twoâ€"yearâ€"old who stubbed his toe on the doorframe. Yep, that's me...hell-devil Johnson, who eats nails for breakfastâ€|crying. What am I coming to?\_ The Sergeant turned away, embarrassed to be crying in front of a fellow soldier.

The Arbiter didn't know how to respond. He was a soldier, not used to comforting anyone. And the Elite felt a slight sense of guilt, knowing that his kind had brought much suffering upon the humans. Humans like this one.

The Elite warrior was about to say something when the floor gave a sudden jolt and a faint rushing sound was heard. A Slipspace transition.

Johnson turned, cracking a smile despite his tears. "What are \_you\_ looking so sad about? Better get ready for another fight, Arbiter. We're goin' to Earth."

\* \* \*

>Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and the deviance from JohnsonArbiter views (the brief portion of the chapter described through PFC Knight's eyes).

\_This chapter is dedicated to all of America's brave servicemen and women, fighting and dying abroad for their country.\_

## 9. Perspective Shift

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\_\*\*A/N:\*\* More changes in perspective. As you can see, and as I have said before, I am slowly drifting away from the typical, well-known characters and viewpoints. The Chief will have to wait. And, on an unrelated note, in my fic one Covenant unit equals roughly two minutes of human time. Just letting you know, because units are used in this particular chapter.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_Ultra Sonikku: Yeah, that is weird, but I didn't actually take off the notice, it was removed because apparently you can't post any notices as chapters. Too bad for me. And don't worry, everyone's ideas will come into considerationâ€|\_

\_nightdragon0: Glad to see somebody picked up on that.  
Nice.\_

\_goldfish demon: Yep, but plot elements will have to come eventually.\_

\_NuclearMage: The Hunters' weapons would cause some interior damage, but usually warships should have interior bulkheads and such to minimize damage. The most their Fuel Beams will do is punch a hole through several walls. And the only survivors from the \_In Amber Clad\_ are Johnson, the Chief (who is at Earth), Miranda Keyes, Michael Ross\_(the pilot of Alpha 279), and the squad of Helljumpers. Everyone else was infected by the Flood.\_

\_Link Master500: Heh, yeah, the whole chapter was basically one hallway battle. And it's good to know that readers actually have some confidence in my role with romance, even though I know virtually nothing about it.\_

\_SPECIALGUY: Well, I was planning not to get Kelly and Dr. Halsey involved, but now I am considering it. Stay tuned.\_

\_appledude211: Damn, man. I really hate to hear that. I have an older brother too, and annoying as he is, it would be sad to have him KIA. Best of wishes to you and your family. Marines rock. Long live the Marine Corps. Semper Fi.\_

\_Stalker: Everything will be considered.\_

\_BrendantheJedi: Yes.\_

\_Duke Devlin: Even I have some of those questions. Problem is, **\*\*I'm\*\*** the one who's supposed to be answering them.\_

\_Zanger: That's classified.\_

\_Cobra 175: I hope they make a safe return as well.\_

\_Saerry Snape: Really? Well, I didn't know that. Thanks for the info.\_

\_Much thanks to everyone listed above! You are not neglected just because I didn't say "thanks" in the personal response!\_

\_Shout outs to everyone else who reviewed: pzgr6, Warrior, YamiPaladinofChaos, Spacefan, psyche, Fhulhi the Crazy, elitegrunt117, The 2 Outcasts, corkscrew737, Eminem Fan, Admiral Toto, Dark Dragoon 22, Ninjoc, The Monitor, virtual-reality, and Bob, thanks for the support, compliments, and reviews!\_

**\*\*Chapter 8: Perspective Shift\*\***

**\*\*0100 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Covenant carrier \_Prophet's Flame\_, holding position in Earth's stratosphere.\*\***

Ship Leader Karkatus stood at the helm of the Covenant carrier Prophet's Flame, his dark beady eyes flickering over the various displays mounted on the bridge walls. The savage, muscular Brute was the equivalent of his Elite Ship Master predecessors, and Karkatus commanded one of the two carriers that had penetrated Earth's orbital defense grid.

The journey had been a harrowing one; literally hundreds of the human projectiles had been thrown at them, a wall of flame that was deadly yet mesmerizing at the same time. Out of the hundred-odd carriers that had made the kamikaze run against the human defenses, there were only two survivors, those two that were now inside the atmosphere of Earth. The Brute wondered if the Grand Fleet would be able to hold out against the withering fire of the infidels' stations and ragged fleet. Primitive though they were, the humans' weapons were nonetheless effective.

Karkatus tore his thoughts from the ongoing battle in orbit and distracted himself with a snort of contempt as he glanced at the purple-blue blood that still stained the deck beneath his heavy feet. It had been his personal pleasure to dispose of the particular Elite Ship Master of this carrier. Now, however, he had other issues to worry about. He resigned himself to surveying the bridge viewscreens.

"Deploy Third Seraph Wing to cover against oncoming human attacks," directed Karkatus. Although he knew the infidel ground weapons could hardly damage a Covenant carrier, there was no sense in being careless. However, the Brute found it more sensible to just glass the non-essential parts of the planet and pick through the remnants. The Prophet had been quite adamant in his orders not to harm the planet, however. A pity â€" many Covenant soldiers would be lost in the cleansing process of the objective. He watched as the only remaining Seraph wing on board the carrier took up defensive positions around the carrier, some still smoking from unrepaired battle damage. Both carriers had lost nearly their full complement of Seraphs, who had been ordered on a suicidal mission to distract Earth's defenses while the carriers punched through.

"Leader, we're descending into the planet's lower atmosphere," reported one of the bridge staff, the Officer Brutes. Unlike the Elites, who were solitary commanders, the Brutes operated like the humans, with lesser officers complementing a commander. Equipment had been set up around the circular bridge platform for the Brute Officers to man.

"Very good. Prepare the troops for immediate landing," ordered Karkatus. A secondary viewscreen activated, highlighting the African continent. The screen automatically zoomed in on a nondescript island off the eastern coast of the continent. Any human monitoring the screen would've identified the island as Zanzibar, Tanzania.

Calligraphy scrolled across the viewscreen and the island blinked red. Smaller characters appeared next to the flashing island. These symbols granted vital information to the reader, including nearby human force deployments, area defenses, and other intelligence a commander would find useful.

Leader Karkatus already knew his orders. They were surprisingly general: clear human forces out of the area, secure the island, and await the Prophet of Truth's arrival. With that in mind, he yelled for one of his Officers to initiate communications with the last remaining High Prophet's Forerunner vessel.

The hovering dais, weathered gray face, and serpentine neck of the High Prophet appeared in the center of the bridge platform via a holograph projector. "Yes, Leader?" the Prophet asked, with the air of someone who was used to contemptuousness of others.

The Brute bowed low, not daring to rise until ordered to. "Holy One, the Prophet's Flame and Pure Spirit have penetrated the infidels' orbital defenses. We are currently en route to the primary objective and will arrive in a matter of minutes."

"Excellent. Proceed as planned. The fleet is preparing a mass attack on the humans' defenses. Before long I shall be able to join you on the surface. Now, I have matters to attend to." The Prophet's holograph winked and disappeared-conversations with the Prophets never lasted long. Karkatus rose from his prone position and glanced at his Officers, swiveled in their chairs and waiting for orders.

"What are you waiting for?" Karkatus barked, abandoning his tone of reverence. "You heard the Prophet. Get us to the objective!"

"Yes, Leader," responded the Officers hurriedly. The Brute in charge of engine functions fired the Prophet's Flame's main thrusters, and the carrier rocketed towards Zanzibar.

The viewscreen that mapped the planet's surface flashed. A purple line traced the map onscreen, indicating the relative path of the Prophet's Flame and its partner. It showed the pair of carriers nearing Zanzibar Island. The massive ship slowed as it neared its destination. The carrier's engines gave a final rumble and the ship came to a stop. With a quick snap of his fingers, Karkatus had the Seraphs pulled back into their launch bays for the purpose of clearing the airspace for his next command.

"Begin the assault," Karkatus ordered. His subordinates nodded, and relayed his orders on to the Brutes, Jackals, and Drones, already on station inside their Phantoms. The peaceful, sunny day in eastern Africa was shattered by the high whine of fifty Phantom engines as they roared across the sky, sunlight glinting dully off of their polished surfaces. The dropships accelerated towards Zanzibar Island, dark shapes like birds of prey swooping down on their helpless victims.

The game was on.

\* \* \*

><strong>0100 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Defense Installation AC-E (African Continent, Eastern), part of the UNSC Earth Defense Network.<strong>

Brigadier General Alexander MacArthur restlessly paced the command room of the African Continent Eastern complex. He had been charged with the defense of the entire eastern portion of the continent, and



so the General had been sent to the African Continent Eastern HQ. The heavily-protected complex was the center of command for all defensive operations in East Africa. Along with 3rd Earth Defense Brigade, comprised of some 5,000 Marines with armor and air support, he was to protect the area from any Covenant incursion.

Now, the General stared at the two red silhouettes of Covenant carriers, holding position not two hundred kilometers off the coast of Zanzibar Island. At least fifty smaller dots, most likely Phantoms, were headed straight for the island. He was confused as to why the massive carriers didn't just glass the area or send a wave of Seraphs in. MacArthur pushed the speculation out of his already troubled mind and turned his attention to the more important task of dealing with these unwelcome visitors.

"Sir, those Phantoms appear to be converging on EAP Wind Power Station 7. The first dropships are probably a kilometer from the beach as we speak," said one of the command staff. "They should be engaging Dog Company of Second Battalion, Third Regiment within minutes. The carriers are pulling back, two thousand kilometers out over the Indian Ocean, sir."

MacArthur nodded, then asked, "Who's Dog Company's CO? Captain Summers, correct?" When a staff officer nodded, the General continued. "Warn him that he's got company inbound, lots of it, and they should get ready. Tell the Captain to ignore the carriers, because they seem to be ignoring us. Have Charlie Company standing by in Pelicans for backup. Get an aircraft carrier battlegroup into position in the Seychelles archipelago to give Dog Company air support."

The COM staff gave an affirmative and sent the General's orders out. Though their CO was quite inexperienced, his family had a long history of brilliant military commanders, not the least of whom was Douglas MacArthur — the most decorated officer in the United States military's history. Other MacArthurs served in Jovian Moons Campaign of 2160 and Interplanetary War of 2164, all earning many medals and climbed to a high step in the military ladder. This gave the ones who were educated about the MacArthurs an expectation for intelligent tactical and strategic command.

The Brigadier General had lobbied for the deployment of surface warships on Earth since the beginning of 2552. At first there had been much opposition to the plans, which were regarded as "antiquated 20th and 21st century warships" that had no place in a modern combat situation. When it became clear that a Covenant invasion was imminent, MacArthur got his wish.

Modernized battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and aircraft carriers of their ancient 20th and 21st century counterparts were deployed to strategic points around the globe. Of course, these would be useless if the Covenant glassed the planet, but from the example of Reach and several other occasions when human colonies were invaded instead of glassed from orbit, some high-ranking military officials recognized that the warships could be of some use and quickly implemented MacArthur's ideas.

At the present time those ships would prove to be very useful indeed; though the MAC-equipped battleships couldn't shell the island because of their incredible firepower that would undoubtedly kill

UNSC forces as well as Covenant. However, the \_Apache\_ carrier battlegroup would provide vital air power that would supplement aircraft launched from land bases. In addition, the miniaturized MAC guns on cruisers and frigates could put precise yet devastating fire onto almost any Covenant LZ. The smaller MACs had less punch than a battleship's massive 18" magnetically-accelerated cannons.

Alex McArthur leaned back in his commander's chair, sighed, and rested his hand on a clenched fist. The situation was very nearly out of his hands now; he had done all he could for the human cause. As a commander confined to a building with limited battlefield awareness, his orders would probably be less appropriate for the battle than a front-line CO's. Also, it would be difficult for him to reinforce those positions; the majority of his troops were scattered all over Africa. By the time a relief group of Marines arrived, Zanzibar was likely to be taken already. Now it was all up to the surface ships, aircraft, and most importantly, the men and women of Dog Company.

\* \* \*

><strong>0105 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
<strong>\*\*EAP Wind Power Station 7, \*\* \*\*Zanzibar  
Island\*\*\*\*Tanzania\*\*\*\*Africa\*\*

Captain Elliot Summers watched through a sniper scope as the Covenant Phantoms approach the beach to Wind Power Station 7. Encased inside a two-meter shell of concrete reinforced by two more meters of instacrete, erected on a rocky bluff overlooking the power station, the commanding officer of Dog Company and his staff in the CP had a commanding view of the area. AA guns also ringed the high bluff, preventing any Covenant from landing up-spin of the station. Summers and his Marines had been sent to the position more than a week ago, when the Covenant made their first attack on Earth, and they had erected all their fortifications during the course of the week.

The Captain had no idea as to how Earth HighCom had figured out how the Covenant would attack such a seemingly worthless position, but he gave thanks for the early warning as he surveyed the heavily reinforced seawall that the majority of his Marines were occupying. His eyes flicked over the bunker and trench system set up as a secondary perimeter if the seawall was breached. As he watched, the Captain listened in to the local COM traffic through the command freq.

\_"This is SeaHawk Wing Alphaâ€|we are making our approach run on the Phantoms, bearing 0-0-1. Hang tight, Dog Company, get ready for some fireworks."\_ As soon as the pilot finished speaking, a flight of twenty gray-blue SeaHawks, multi-role carrier-launched fighters, streaked into view at over Mach 4 with an earsplitting roar.

The fifty Phantoms turned their plasma turrets to face the SeaHawks, one hundred and fifty cannons all told. They unleashed a torrent of plasma on the oncoming fighters, who broke formation and easily avoided the sluggish plasma charges. The turrets on the Phantoms couldn't track the highly nimble fighters, and they swiveled madly in vain to target their enemies.

The SeaHawk wing formed up again in attack formation. Plumes of white and orange appeared on their wingtips as they launched Sidewinder-XII missiles at the hapless cluster of Phantoms.

With a series of blinding, red-orange explosions mingled with blue, the missiles found the Phantoms. Four or five were utterly destroyed by the high-explosive warheads. Another three sustained damage, trailed smoke, and lost altitude. Most of the dropships had also lost a few plasma cannons to the barrage, but they were useless against the SeaHawks either way.

The fighters swooped in for another pass, with a turn so tight that a 21st century pilot would've passed out. However, the SeaHawks had modern equipment that prevented the pilots from being knocked unconscious by the incredible G-forces of such a turn.

SeaHawks dived at their enemies, launched their remaining missiles, then deliberately strafed their opponents' plasma cannons with 40mm rotary cannons. The 40mm cannons were mounted two to a SeaHawk and could spit out 1,800 AP-HE rounds a minute. Plasma turrets flew off from their mounts from the assault, hung limp as their couplings were destroyed, or exploded from missile impacts.

The results were devastating. Three more Phantoms were lost, but the important detail was that barely any plasma cannons left. This meant that the Covenant wouldn't be able to strafe Dog Company and kill off the majority of the Marines before their troops' feet even touched the ground. Also, the Phantoms would be forced to put down on the beach, because the interior of the station was filled with heavy machine gun turrets, or HMGs, along with the AA defenses ringing bluffs over the Marine fortifications. Without covering fire from their dropships to make the humans keep their heads down, any Covenant soldier landing in the interior would be cut to pieces in milliseconds.

"Hope you enjoyed the show. Alpha Wing's over and out." Summers smiled and clicked on his own COM. "Thanks for the fireworks. Too bad we didn't get popcorn to go with it."

The wing leader laughed, did a barrel roll just for kicks, and peeled off with the rest of his wing, back towards the aircraft carrier Apache.

"Now, boys and girls," said Captain Summers, in a statement directed to his own soldiers. "Thanks to those SeaHawks, the Covenant will have to land on the beach, not right in middle of the station. We don't have twenty M297s trained on the shore for nothing. As soon as those bastards' dirty feet touch the sand, open fire. Not just you with the MGs, everyone. Don't stop firing unless the order is given, and hold your positions on the wall. If the Covenant breach the seawall, we'll have to pull back to our secondary lines, and we'll lose a lot of men in the process. I want Fourth Platoon in the bunkers facing the seawall entrance. That's a big gaping hole in our wall; don't let anyone through it. Oh, and, one more thing. Kick some damned alien ass! Clear?"

"Crystal, sir!" his soldiers roared back. The words had hardly left their mouths when the leathernecks looked up. The first Brutes were drifting down from the Phantoms. One hundred and sixty Marines roared battle cries, and opened fire.

The fanatic first arrivals paid dearly for their overenthusiasm. The twenty or so Brutes barely even knew what hit them as thousands of

armor-piercing rounds poured in from every crevice, hole, and firing port on the walls. Their unrecognizable, bullet-ridden corpses had just hit the sandy earth when more Covenant drifted down from the lifts. The pattern of Brutes and Jackals landing and being slaughtered continued for quite some time. The M297 SAWs, Battle Rifles, and Sniper Rifles of the Marines overwhelmed the helpless aliens. Before long piles of bodies began to accumulate.

In an attempt to end the ongoing slaughter, a flight of Seraphs streaked overhead, strafing the human positions with miniature pulse lasers. There weren't enough of the aircraft to do much damage, and even had there been, Dog Company was dug in too well. Still, it distracted the M297 gunners, who angled their machine guns upwards and sprayed the alien fighters with the help of computerized leading/tracking scopes built into their M297s. Shields on the Seraphs flickered, but they shrugged the damage and arced around for another pass. This was a mistake on the part of the humans, one that Captain Summers quickly corrected.

He keyed his mike and yelled angrily, "What do you think you're doing? Your .30 cal rounds won't do a thing to those Seraphs! Concentrate your fire on the landing Covenant troops â€" they're the main threat! Let our AA guns handle the Seraphs!"

Quickly, the machine-gunners whipped their M297s back to face the beach, but the damage was done. The landing Covenant soldiers were only faced by seventy Battle Rifles and ten Sniper Rifles, which were powerful weapons but slow-firing, which meant that they couldn't deal with forty Phantoms dropping troops at the same moment. The Jackals formed a shield wall impervious to the Battle Rifle 9.5mm rounds, which were higher-caliber but shorter and overall less powerful than the 7.62mm M297 rounds. Brutes behind this temporary barrier set up stationary shield generators similar to the Jackals' shields for even more protection. These could ward off even the heavy rounds of the machine guns and the snipers.

Marines tossed grenades over the stationary shields, but Jackals angled their shields upwards and the frags ricocheted off of the energy barriers. Only a few actually detonated in the enemy formation, causing few casualties. The soldiers of Dog Company picked off those still coming out of the dropships' lifts, but the majority had already made it off already thanks to the quick-deploying Phantom lifts.

Captain Summers had a quick and easy fix to the problem. "First Platoon, Second Platoon, get to those Rocket Launcher caches behind the seawall! Show the Covenant that their shields aren't impenetrable! Stay low, watch for Seraphs!" There was a sonic boom over his head as a Seraph flew overhead, dropping an explosive form of plasma near the command bunker. The four-meter thick combination of concrete and instacrete took the brunt of the blow, and nobody in the command staff was injured. Quickly, more instacrete was poured into the hole created by the explosive.

The rock beneath the Captain rumbled as a nearby 88mm repeating antiaircraft cannon opened up. The weapon, sitting on a powered mount, could rotate quick enough to track a Seraph and with the built-in targeting computer, the gunner could lead the shots with great accuracy. Combined with the powerful 88mm HE shell that could be fired twice in a second, the twelve AA guns soon proved to be

deadly for the Covenant fighters. Despite this, their usefulness was limited as they could not angle low enough to hit the Phantoms over the beach, which were actually at a negative elevation compared to the high, rocky bluffs the AA guns were perched on.

A Seraph gained altitude after peeled off from covering the landing forces. This proved to be a fatal mistake. Twelve 88mm shells pounded into its shields and armor, easily penetrating both. The fighter's fuel cells detonated and swallowed the remnants of the Seraph in blue flame.

The Marines on the seawall dropped useless Battle Rifles and shouldered the M19 Rocket Launchers. Thirty 102mm rockets streaked down onto shore, detonating upon impact with the shields that the Covenant had constructed. With a series of rapid explosions, the energy fields winked out, and the Marines quickly fired the second rocket in their launchers' tubes. Bodies and weapons were thrown about as the rockets struck, along with a large cloud of dust. The rocket-wielding Marines hastily ejected empty tubes, slammed fresh ones in, and fired twice more to clear the beach of any survivors.

When the swirling dust, sand, and smoke finally cleared, all that remained were the blackened remains of Brutes and Jackals, strewn about like leaves in the autumn gale, along with a section of beach where the sand was mysteriously missing. The rocketeers, free to direct their fire anywhere they chose, concentrated fire on one Phantom at a time. The empty dropships quickly fed more power to their engines and drifted upwards, straight into the fire vector of the 88mm AA cannons.

Marines on the seawall winced as shrapnel rained down on their positions. Five Phantoms fell to the beach with a sand-muffled thud, flames licking at their sides and large holes smoking in their side armor. The remaining Covenant dropships quickly turned tail, fired thrusters, and jetted off towards the safety of their carriers in the distance.

Captain Summers watched the enemy craft disappear, in the direction of the distant, silvery specks that marked the Covenant carriers. The absolute stupidity of the Covenant appalled him. Here, the aliens had lost nearly two hundred soldiers on the beaches, plus fifteen or so Phantoms, when they had the firepower to annihilate the power station without a single casualty. There must've been something located at or under this position that the Covenant were worried about damaging.

The Captain nearly laughed. Covenantâ€|worried about damaging human real estate? He had a better chance of destroying those carriers with a Battle Rifle loaded with rubber bullets than the Covenant not taking an opportunity to destroy human territory. He took off his cap and ran a hand through his short brown hair. Something bigger was at work here. And generally, when a front-line soldier ran into something bigger than he was used to, it was custom to let the asswipes in HighCom to sort things out.

He surveyed the seawall with his sniper's scope, assessing the damage to the installation. There hardly was any, aside from numerous plasma burns and scorched sections of concrete. Only one Marine had lost his life to a Jackal sniper, and about fifteen had been wounded by stray

plasma fire. The battle had gone well, far better than Summers had dreamed. However, if he knew the Covenant tactics, which he certainly did, the aliens didn't give up easily. There was sure to be a second assault. There were definitely more than a few hundred troops aboard those carriers.

In the meantime, however, it appeared that the Marines had time to prepare for an assault. With the enemy most likely hesitant to attempt another dropship insertion, due to the disastrous first attack, it seemed that a seaborne invasion would be the Covenant's choice. The other alternative, a rather nasty one at that, would be having the carriers swoop in, activate grav lifts, and drop hundreds or even thousands of soldiers at once, while incinerating the Marine positions with pulse lasers and plasma.

That didn't seem very likely; the Covenant obviously would've taken a stab at that before. So, Captain Summers ordered three-quarters of the Marine sniper contingent on the seawall to lug their gear and packs of 14.5mm ammunition up the carved ramps that led to the cliffside bunkers. These bunkers were placed farther out from the command bunker, with the sea literally lapping at the cliff's feet ten meters down from the fortifications. This strategic position gave the sharpshooters a clear field of fire on the beach and any incoming landing craft, as well as increased protection compared to hunkering down on the seawall.

The snipers stripped off the armor plates that covered their chests, backs, arms and legs, because the bulky armor restricted a sniper's movement and was quite useless due to level of protection that the concrete shell offered them. They stacked the armor in a corner, propped up their snipers on bipods, and commenced the waiting game.

Spray from the pounding surf below misted on the snipers' faces, and a refreshing African breeze blew through their shorn hair. Seagulls wheeled and squawked overhead, returning after being chased away from the sudden exchange of gunfire. Some of the Marines reflected on their situation, thinking that it might not have been such a bad place to be, except for the fact that they were sitting on wanted territory.

\* \* \*

><strong>0127 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Covenant carrier <em>Prophet's Flame<em>, holding position in Earth's stratosphere.\*\*

And wanted territory it was. Ship Leader Karkatus fumed silently on board the Prophet's Flame, pacing the bridge restlessly like a caged tiger. Bridge officers began to piece together the exact account of the near-complete failure of the attack on the human "Zanzibar" area as dropship pilots gave their reports. There were conflicting accounts, but for the most part, the story was the same: the assault on the installation had resulted in the loss of every Covenant soldier that was landed on the shores, while the humans had taken little to no casualties.

In addition, all pilots reported that they had been attacked by a wave of human aircraft, and harassed by anti-aircraft fire, which caused the loss of several Phantoms. Clearly, an airdrop was now out

of the question. But what other ways did the Covenant have of attacking the location? The bridge officers had conducted an analysis of the ship's status, and concluded that an insertion via the carriers' grav lifts was implausible; the lifts had been temporarily disabled in orbit by the electromagnetic pulses of the humans' nuclear weapons. The lifts would come back on line, but it would take time.

Waiting was out of the question, as well. Karkatus had a schedule, and he intended to keep that schedule " for the purpose of keeping his head. How was he supposed to abide by the Prophet's timeframe, without any means of attacking the humans?

As if the dilemma wasn't bad enough, the bridge communications officer notified the Ship Leader of an incoming transmission, which Karkatus quickly barked for the officer to put on the main holoscreen. It was the Prophet of Truth.

"Leader" Karkatus, is it? How goes the assault on the infidels?" asked the Prophet, carefully inspecting his robes as if he considered speaking to Karkatus a secondary concern.

"Very well, Excellency," lied Karkatus smoothly. "The human installation will be in our hands and prepared for your holy arrival within sixty units."

"Perfect. Complete your task successfully and you will be greatly rewarded, as will all who stand by me when the Great Journey begins. Failure will not be tolerated. It is not an option." With that ominous threat still hanging in the air, the image of the Prophet vanished from the viewscreen.

Karkatus was perspiring slightly and shaken from his brief exchange with Truth. He quickly masked this by yelling at the crew to resume their work, which was mostly pointless as there was no real task to be done.

The Brute Leader sat and racked his miniscule brain. There had to be some method of attack that was available. For a good five minutes, Karkatus mentally went over nearly every Covenant battle plan he had learned. He muttered a Brute curse to himself. "I have nothing but infantry, useless Phantoms, and vehicles. Even my remaining Seraphs have been destroyed."

Karkatus's mind was drifting on to the next thought when it abruptly spun in reverse. "Vehicles-that's it!" the Brute thought ecstatically. The Covenant vehicles were all equipped with the wondrous anti-gravity engines of the Forerunners. On board the "Prophet's Flame" cavernous holds, there were hundreds of Ghosts, Spectres, Wraiths, but most importantly, Shadows. The Shadows were transports, each capable of holding up to eight of the various types of Covenant, in addition to a driver and a gunner. They were they perfectly suited for the amphibious assault Karkatus had in mind.

Hurriedly, the Brute Leader and his Officers outlined a rough battle plan. The Shadows would form the bulk of the force, filled with Covenant soldiers. They had plasma cannons mounted onboard, but it was obvious that more escort was needed. This was mainly provided by Spectres, which would be doubly useful for the attack because of

their ability to carry three additional warriors per Spectre, excluding the driver. Wraiths would bombard the human defensive position to rubble before the troops were landed. Finally, Banshees would defend against aerial attacks, even though they were designed with support against ground targets in mind. The Ghosts were held in reverse, for the reason that they were far too vulnerable to take part in the primary assault, and were essentially useless compared to the Shadows and Spectres that had firepower, armor, and multiple crew capacity. The Ghosts' only advantage was speed, which was deemed as unnecessary by the Brute command.

Now Karkatus relaxed slightly as his pilots and soldiers began the arduous task of loading up the vehicles, attaching them one by one to the remaining Phantoms on board the Prophet's Flame so they could be dropped on the calm Indian Ocean waters. Normal procedure would have the Shadows, Spectres, and Wraiths lowered through the grav lift, but the lift was not operational at the current moment. The crew of the second Covenant carrier, Pure Spirit, did likewise. Within half an hour, a formidable armada was assembled in the shadow of the two carriers.

Leader Karkatus's voice rang out from the vehicles' communications gear. "Soldiers of the Covenant, the High Prophet of Truth has called upon you to cleanse in the name of the Great Journey! Succeed in your mission of conquest, and salvation will come to all! The mighty Covenant will never be stopped by these mere humans!"

The army assembled below the carriers roared out in approval, the vehicles' propulsion kicked in, and soon all that was left below the Covenant warships was the sea, upset by the assault force's anti-gravity engines.

Karkatus watched white foam swirling around in the restless sea through the Prophet's Flame's main camera. Brutes were not especially religious, but at that moment he offered a quick prayer to the Gods for the success of his mission. Prayers and hopes wouldn't win the coming fight — overwhelming numbers and crushing firepower would.

\* \* \*

><strong>0131 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Defense Installation AC-E (African Continent, Eastern), part of the UNSC Earth Defense Network.<strong>

"General, you'd better take a look at this." The statement broke the silence that had prevailed in tense HQ command room. The Brigadier General, who had been standing motionless facing the main TAC screen, did not turn.

"Put it on, main TAC," MacArthur said crisply. A portion of the semi-holographic morphed to a radar readout. From the two large blobs that were the Covenant carriers, a much larger, solid blob had emerged, and it was headed straight for Zanzibar Island.

General MacArthur's back went even more rigid than it had initially been. "Can we get a satellite photo ofâ€|whatever that is?" he asked his COM officer. The officer bent over his station, sent out a few point-to-point messages, then shook his head.



"No, sir, many of the satellites dedicated to the African region have been disabled by Covenant fire," the officer said.

"Reconnaissance aircraft?"

The officer bent back over his console momentarily, then lifted his head again. "Done."

The Brigadier General waited nervously while an unmanned aerial reconnaissance craft was launched from the carrier Apache. It flew to the target area nearly instantly at a speed of Mach 8, snapped a few high-resolution photos with varying lens magnification, and returned to its parent carrier.

Within seconds the photos had been transferred to the AC-E HQ complex's database and flickered to life onscreen. There was a slight intake of breath around the command room staff as they viewed the scene captured by the UARC, but for the most part the staff kept themselves outwardly calm.

MacArthur did not move a muscle, but he felt his mouth dry. "Get a message through to Captain Summers, now. Priority Alpha. Notify him that he has at least a battalion-strength Covenant force heading his way, but most likely a regiment-strength force. The attack force is completely mechanized, with support artillery and aircraft." His COM officer understood the urgency of his message and hurriedly send out word of the impending attack.

The General tapped the icon of an airbase on the main TAC screen. The airbase located on the coast of Tanzania, perfect for sending reinforcements to Zanzibar Island. The icon lit up and characters scrolled next to it, reading "Charlie Company," along with several available commands underneath it. He tapped one of these command icons, opening up a secure channel with the airbase. The icon flashed several times and then turned solid, indicating the channel was active.

"Tanzania Airbase Delta, this is Brigadier General MacArthur. Order Charlie Company's birds to lift off immediately. LZ: Zanzibar Island, Wind Power Station 7. One of my officers will transmit coordinates." The General nodded to one of his staff, who hastily did his superior's bidding.

"Affirmative, Charlie Company is off the ground and on the way," replied the COM officer on duty at Delta Airbase. The airbase's icon flashed again and dimmed.

Now, MacArthur tapped the carrier icon positioned in the Seychelles archipelago – the Apache task force. It blinked as the connection was established, secured, and an officer on the other end confirmed the connection.

"Apache carrier battlegroup. Go ahead," said the officer on board the aircraft carrier.

"Apache, this is General MacArthur. We have a major Covenant assault force en route to Zanzibar Island. It's a sea-based attack, but the Covenant are using their vehicles' anti-gravity capabilities, which means it's comprised mostly of their Spectres, Shadows, and Wraiths. Concentrate on their artillery; that is the main threat to

our ground forces. Resistance should be minimal â€" the plasma that Covenant vehicles fire is very slow, and the reconnaissance photo shows only Banshees as air cover."

"Aye, sir, Captain de BlanÃ§ sends and affirmative and his compliments. We'll have a few UARCs overhead streaming live video to you. Tell the boys on the beaches to grab some popcorn and enjoy the show, too," said the \_Apache\_'s cheerful communications officer.

MacArthur nodded to himself, turned to the row of viewscreens to the left of the main TAC screen. Four of them flickered with static as the UARC feeds were patched through. The screens cleared, each displaying a different portion of the Covenant attack force. A fifth was a radar scan of the area, laid over a digital map. There were four squares on the map that represented the area covered by each UARC's cameras.

The radar pinged several groups of contacts approaching the main blob that was the Covenant force. On the TAC the incomings were tagged as friendlies, SeaHawks.

The UARCs, operating at a higher altitude than the SeaHawks, had a clear view of the attack aircraft as they swooped down on the Covenant. General MacArthur increased the magnification on the cameras slightly. The SeaHawks dipped to very low elevations, peppering Wraiths with their heavy cannons. Tiny contrails of white smoke marked the Sidewinders, which could and had been reconfigured for air-to-ground use. The Wraiths were neatly lined up in rows, and this just made the wholesale slaughter easier as the SeaHawks moved them down like rows of corn to a reaper.

Plasma fire was lashing up in return, but just as MacArthur had predicted, most of the plasma moved too slowly for it to be effective. Covenant gunners would've had to lead their targets by insane amounts, which meant they would have to point their weapons so impossibly far in front of their targets that the weapons were useless. Only the Spectre's turret fired plasma that was quick enough to hit the fighters, but without computer-lead systems and sufficient rotation speed, they were quite useless as well.

Wraiths exploded, one after another, sending shrapnel and debris splashing into the ocean. The SeaHawks continued to pound their targets with cannon fire and missiles until their weapons were depleted; then they jetted off back to the carrier.

A second wave, comprised of forty SeaHawks like the first wave, had been circling in formation roughly four kilometers from the main action. Once the first wave had departed, the airspace above the Covenant assault force was cleared and the second wave moved in. The aliens were in absolute disarray as they threw up their arms helplessly. Wraiths continued to be decimated by the fighters without pause.

One unlucky SeaHawk pilot pulled out of a dive straight into a wall of plasma being fired by some Spectres. The fighter's armor reflected or absorbed the incoming fire, but he flew into another plasma wall being put up by a row of Shadows. His weakened armor could hold up no more, the plasma found the SeaHawk's miniature reactor, and the fighter detonated in an orange fireball.

There was no reason for the Covenant to cheer as the other SeaHawk pilots, stung by the loss of a wingmate, continued their attacks with renewed vigor. The alien drivers abandoned their orderly row formations, as this made them much more vulnerable to attack. The Shadows, Spectres, and Wraiths scattered in an attempt to minimize casualties.

Finally, a few minutes later, the last of the SeaHawks had expended their ammunition, flew rings around the Banshees that had been nearly useless against the quick human fighters, and returned to the \_Apache\_.

MacArthur, who had seen all this through the unmanned aerial reconnaissance craft, nodded in satisfaction. A full quarter of the alien force was in shambles, either destroyed outright or too heavily damaged to be effective. He could see no undamaged Wraith anywhere in the Covenant formation, for those that were left all were pockmarked with holes and glowing with blue fires. The SeaHawks had done their jobs perfectly; enemy artillery would be no threat to D and C Companies on the beaches.

\* \* \*

><strong>0135 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™|  
<strong>\*\*EAP Wind Power Station 7, \*\* \*\*Zanzibar  
Island\*\*\*\*Tanzania\*\*\*\*Africa\*\*

Captain Summers lowered his binoculars from his eyes. Like most of Dog Company, the Captain had been watching the steady line of orange and blue explosions that dotted the horizon. Tiny specks, SeaHawks, were visible among the explosions, circling on their attack runs.

Within a few minutes the SeaHawks had expended their ammunition and flew off, leaving the horizon on the sea calm once again. A slight plume of smoke drifted over the darkening sky, and the beautiful azure water slowly dimmed in symphony to the skies.

A blast of hot air overhead startled him, and he jerked his head up. There were nine Pelicans hovering overhead, each loaded with Charlie Company Marines fully geared up and ready to cut the Covenant to pieces. Summers had been so preoccupied with other matters that he had not heard the Pelicans' engines.

The dropships touched down on the hastily built landing pads, overlooking the rear of the power station. Marines filed off, orders were shouted, and the two company Captains greeted each other.

"Captain Summers." Charlie Company's CO, Captain Jason Allen, nodded to his Dog Company counterpart.

"Captain Allen," said Summers, also nodding. "I assume you've already been briefed on the situation here?"

"Yes, Ace HQ send down a full transcript and battle report earlier," replied Allen, referring the African Continent â€" Eastern headquarters where MacArthur was stationed. The Captain glanced around, then continued, "The Marines have been taking this too

lightly. I've overheard their chatter, and most think it's going to be a cakewalk."

"Well, you'd better put them in their place, and I'll do the same with my men." Captain Allen nodded, then turned away to speak with his own men over a COM channel.

Summers was an experienced commander who had seen action on both the Outer and Inner Colonies, and was considered lucky to have survived all of that. He knew the dangers of complacency and overconfidence, had seen the amount of Covenant in the UARC photos, and was going to hammer the truth into his Marines.

The Captain clicked on his helmet mic and broadcast his message to the whole company. "Listen up, men, what I've got to say is pretty damn important." His Marines stopped talking amongst each other and cocked an ear to hear what their CO had to say.

"As you all know, the Covenant have landed a seaborne assault force, which is headed straight for us. You also know that our SeaHawks have attacked this force, and knocked out their artillery support to make things easier on us. Some of you may think that because the Covenant no longer have Wraiths, handling this assault will be a cakewalk. Well, think again. The Covenant are coming in, fast and hard, hundreds â€" maybe even thousands of them. Make no mistake, you're all in for the fight of your lives, and few of you will come out unscarred."

The soldiers of Dog Company returned to their duties soon thereafter, noticeably subdued after their commander's somber speech. Soldiers from C Company were delegated to various duties alongside their D Company brethren. Snipers took up positions in cliffside bunkers and on the seawall. Most of the normal infantrymen, armed with Battle Rifles and M297 SAWs, linked up with the rocket jockeys and dug in along the coastline. The series of hastily dug slit trenches would serve as the first line of defense, while the seawall would be the second, and finally a row of bunkers and trenches would be the third, located behind the seawall. Men laid down sandbags and poured instacrete in front of the beach trenches for some measure of protection against Covenant fire.

Meanwhile, on the rocky bluffs, forty mortars had been set up to pound the Covenant landing vehicles and troops. The mortar teams had all set their weapons to a forty-five degree angle, giving them the maximum range. They would use electronic field binoculars that had digital rangefinders to figure out the distance between them and the incoming Covenant, calculate the time it took for the mortar shell to hit with a reference sheet, and send the shells on their way at very precise moments. The Covenant would unwittingly drive straight into the shells, and would continue to be pounded by the mortars as long as their ammunition lasted. Furthermore, instacrete had been poured in a semicircle around the mortar teams as a deterrent to sniper fire, and this all combined to create a very useful weapon against the alien attackers.

Down below, Shotguns and SMGs were left leaning against the seawall. They would be used by the Marines when the beach trenches had been breached and the Covenant were scaling the walls. Any Brute or Jackal who popped its head over the top of the wall would be greeted by either an eight-gauge shotgun blast or a stream of 5mm SMG bullets.

If the wall was taken, C12 charges had already been set underneath it to quickly demolish it. Captains Summers and Allen had agreed that once the wall was in Covenant hands, it would only be a disadvantage to the humans because it would offer the aliens a vantage point to pour fire down on the Marines.

As final preparations were made, the Marines took a light meal and swigs from their canteens. There was no point in fighting on an empty stomach, but each member of the UNSC forces on the beach that day wondered if that meal would be their last.

\* \* \*

>Damn, how long did this take? Two months? More? It seems that that's going to be a habit now. I even intended for this to be longer but decided to cut the crap and finally give you something. The least I can say is that I'm sorry, been pretty busy lately and had a considerable bit of writer's block. I have other things to do than fanfiction, also, and my parents have been thrashing me more than lately about test crap (had to take GEPAs, now studying like crazy to take the new SATs). And, in my rush to get this out, I <strong>haven't</strong> edited / proofread this, so please don't start whining over some error you find. Just point it out and I'll fix it. Still, I hope you enjoyed this, or else I'll have wasted weeks and weeks churning out crap.

Now, I'm off to watch the NBA playoffs. Enough of this.

\* \* \*

>Heh, thanks to a lightning-fast update by pzgr6 (kudos thanks to him), I was reminded that today is the 60th anniversary of the surrender of Nazi Germany. And so,

\_This chapter is dedicated to all the brave soldiers who fell to ensure peace and freedom for future generations by fighting the Nazi regime.

> <em>

I get to make another dedication.

## 10. You Can Run

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\_\*\*A/N:\*\* none\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_pzgr6: Wow, that was a fast review. It was in like, 30 minutes or something? Nice!\_

\_Ninjoc: Yeah, people do tend to ignore originality more (I know this from friends' experiences), and that sucks. Still, I don't particularly write for reviews; I'm writing to show my point of view on what will / what should / what can happen. It just so happens that so-called "Halo 3" or "Halo 2 extension" fics than more original ones. Writers who show originality are to be commended unlike others who write slightly modified versions of "Halo 3" fics.\_

\_Ultra Sonikku: Thanks for the tipâ€¦in the meantime I'll be sweating it out over some stupid practice tests because if I don't get a bad score, my parents will thrash me into the dust. **\*\*Literally\*\***. No joke here, unfortunatelyâ€¦\_

\_nightdragon0: Valid points. I somewhat had those in mind while writing the chapter, in fact.\_

\_AdoptedThug: Yeah, it's always better when the humans slaughter Covenant, but I have to balance it out. Draw your own conclusions as to what this means.\_

\_Hibiki54: Most of the next few chapters will tend to have a little more plot than action, but I'll try to satisfy the more bloodthirsty types as well.\_

\_Khellendros: Heh, at least somebody is picking up on the fact that I hate Brutes, and that they're primitive, oversized, bipedal gorillas with little more (if not less) intelligence than any gorilla from Earth. Elite Brute\_

\_Duke Devlin: No, no, I agree with what you said, and my parents are so oppressive already that you sound completely reasonable to me.\_

\_drunkgrunt343: Earth. It's coming. Very soon. It's a very climatic and significant battle, but obviously it won't be the endâ€¦not even close.\_

\_Gavius: Wellâ€¦thanks.\_

\_Yomiko the hellbunny slayer: Heh, that was my original name for the Captain, but I'm saving it for later.\_

\_Much thanks to everyone listed above! You are not neglected just because I didn't say "thanks" in the personal response!\_

\_Shout outs to everyone else who reviewed: Zanger, Warrior, Madame Belldandy, corkscrew737, goldfish demon, and Ugabuga, thanks for the support, compliments, and reviews!\_

**\*\*Chapter 9: You Can Runâ€¦\*\***

**\*\*0104 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™™|  
\*\*\*Unidentified Covenant-controlled Forerunner vessel, holding  
position behind Covenant staging point around Mars.\*\***

The Master Chief stood underneath the small vent that represented the only chance his team had of stopping the Covenant High Prophet of Truth. Mentally, he reminded himself that it was not his team. Rather, it was 'Canarmee's team, as the former members of the Covenant were much more likely to follow a member of their own. Especially when the other option was a human who had killed thousands of their fellow soldiers.

He didn't blame them; the Spartan trusted them no more than they trusted him. He sighed to himself. Back to the 'trust' issue again. Am I ever going to gain the trust of these bastards, and will I ever trust them?\_ He let the unimportant thought go and surveyed the

"Separatists," as he had silently dubbed them. It was a curious term, but he felt that the word accurately described the ones it classified â€" Elites, Grunts, and Hunters, breaking away from the cause they had been attached to for so long and finding a new one to fight for. At least for the moment.

\_ 'Canarmee â€" he's the one I can trust and rely on, almost as much as a human soldier, \_ thought the Master Chief as the Elite in mention issued final orders to his soldiers. True, there had been friction between the two at first, but now each had a grudging admiration and respect for the other. The Chief definitely sensed this, and he was fairly certain that the Elite could as well. He had sworn to himself that he would never trust his former enemies, but his views were changing to reflect the current situation.

The Master Chief's eyes swept over the other former Covenant that surrounded him. The Grunts were obviously used to being oppressed and taking orders already. In fact, receiving those orders from a Spartan might even be easier treatment than what they could expect from their normal officers.

The other Elites, however, he could not rely on as much. They were fighting for the same cause, that was certain, but to what extent would that hold together the rag-tag mixing of Elite and Spartan? He could feel resentment and hostility directed towards him, seeping through the air like a poisonous cloud. The Elites were a very proud species; ruined and removed from power though they were, they still clung on to their old arrogance.

However, that faint aura of poison was deadly enough to kill them all. The Master Chief knew that the Elites could watch him fall without turning a hair, and, truth be told, he felt the same way about them, as well. For the coming battle, such mutual animosity was completely unacceptable. The human was more open-minded than his stubborn Elite counterparts, and thus could put aside his thoughts of mistrust and hatred of the Elites for the time being. Somehow, the Spartan had to convince the Elites to do the same. They would never listen to him, so to get his message across, he neededâ€¦|

" 'Canarmee!" The Elite in question was inwardly startled by the sudden call, but still as unemotional as ever on the outside as he strode over to the Chief. John beckoned for 'Canarmee to follow him into a less crowded section of the room. Sensing that the human had something important to say, 'Canarmee asked no questions. It was mere proof that the two had solid faith in each other; the Chief would've expected any other Elite to ignore him.

So the Spartan spoke of the issue on hand, and the Elite listened. Luckily for the Master Chief, 'Canarmee understood the situation well and was able to drill some sense into the Elites under his command. Just as UNSC Marines and ODSTs followed their orders, when a ranking officer of the Covenant issued a command, it was respected. The Chief felt relief wash over him. Going into battle alone would've been better than going into battle with "allies" that could just as easily kill him as the enemy. Now, that would no longer be an issue. He hoped.

'Canarmee was the first one to test the ropes. The Elite clambered up to the narrow vent, strapping his weapons to his back and climbing

with two ropes to hold his weight. Like the Master Chief, 'Canarmee was much heavier when fully armored. Therefore, after the Elite was safely in the vent, the Chief began his ascent in the same fashion that 'Canarmee had, by using multiple ropes to support his weight.

By the time the last Elites and Grunts had hauled themselves up, John and 'Canarmee had already begun crawling through the vent systems so that room was made available for the others to enter the vent as well. The two leaders' shields scraped against the narrow duct walls, flashing purple and yellow in the darkness. Quickly both of them deactivated their shield generators, and 'Canarmee also ordered his team to do the same. As the strike team moved further into the winding series of tunnels, all light from the makeshift brig was lost. The only light available to the soldiers was the glow of their weapons — purple-pink emanating off of Needlers, Plasma Rifles tinged with blue at their tips, and the green ammunition indicators on the Carbines' magazines. The Chief's MJOLNIR armor, however, was equipped with a flashlight, which he quickly put to good use.

The Elites and Grunts on rear-guard, if they could be called that, blindly followed the flickering shadows from up front, hoping that they were being led in the correct direction. 'Canarmee wound his way through the tunnels as best as he could, using his knowledge of the ship's interior as a guide. Several times, the team hit dead ends, and were forced to backtrack. After what seemed like an eternity of crawling through the pitch-black vent tunnels, 'Canarmee and the Chief finally spotted light streaming in from a vent grating. 'Canarmee gave orders for his team to be extremely silent, and run through a final equipment check. The Chief clicked off his flashlight and made sure all his weapons were in working order and fully loaded.

The Spartan slid up to the vent grating. He did this with exaggerated, slow movements, in order to mute the scraping of his armor against the stone walls as much as possible. Then, he drew out his fiber-optics probe once more, inserted it into his helmet, and snaked the thin tube out through the vent.

The cavernous room that they were about to enter was packed with Brutes and Jackals. This was both good and bad news; good because the increased amount of enemies in the area meant that they were getting closer, but obviously bad because of the opposition they would face. He noted that the Jackals carried shields of a deep crimson color, and that the Brutes carried brightly decorated battle flags on their flags. Clearly, these were elite troops, most likely protecting the Prophet. John sent a video feed over a Covenant channel to 'Canarmee, hoping that the Elite combat suit's electronics were compatible with the MJOLNIR Mark VI's.

Apparently, they were, because the Elite halted his equipment inspection and turned his attention to the feed on his HUD. 'Canarmee was silent for a moment as he took in the details of the room.

"So — any idea where we are?" the Chief asked slowly. 'Canarmee drew out the handle of his Energy Sword and palmed it before responding.

"Yes, I know precisely where this room is located. This is the Holy



Guard's staging room." He paused and muttered an Elite curse under his breath. "This room used to be populated solely by honorable Elites and Grunts. Now, the Prophet entrusts these fools to protect him? We shall teach him that it was a grave mistake to abandon the Elites."

John waited patiently for an answer, not wanting to fray the Elite's already-stretched anger.

'Canarmee managed to calm himself down and turned back to face the Chief. "I apologize for that, but it was necessary to let my anger out so I may enter battle with a cool head." As the Elite spoke, he shifted the sword handle from hand to hand as if itching to activate the deadly weapon. "We are in luck. The Holy Guard's staging room is adjacent to a hallway that leads directly to the vessel's Control Room."

The Chief nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Now, how will we deal with those guards? There are easily a hundred of them. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't be that difficult to eliminate them, but now we can only enter the room one at a time, due to the narrow vent system. We'll be torn apart before we hit the ground."

The Elite issued some commands over a Covenant channel, and an oblong purple object was passed up to the Elite leader. He handed the device to the Master Chief, who turned it over in his hands. The object had a hard casing, and running through its middle was a shimmering blue streak, not unlike the plasma conduits used on Covenant warships.

"Plasma explosive," 'Canarmee explained, even though the Chief had already guessed at the object's purpose. He opened his communications systems to encompass the entire force gathered in the tunnels. "We have ten of these heavy explosives. They are very destructive; each one matches the power of five plasma grenades. I suggest that we drop and detonate them to cause confusion and devastation against the enemy's ranks. While they are still in disarray, we should drop down into the room. As our forces enter, it is advisable to cover our entry with plasma grenades. The remaining survivors should be easy prey for us. Since the majority of the enemy will be distracted by the explosives and grenades, we should be able to take the room with few casualties."

John reviewed the plan, and found it to be a fairly sound one. "Agreed," he said, smoothly retracting and sheathing his probe. The Elites and Grunts carrying the explosive plasma devices passed them up to 'Canarmee. He tapped a combination of buttons on each of the explosives, then crawled up to the vent.

Without hesitation, the Elite smashed the vent grating open with his fist, then began tossing the explosives into the room below. The Chief heard Jackals squawking and Brutes roaring below. Plasma fire lashed up at the Elite, but he took the blows on his shields and did not back down until he had thrown the last explosive out.

"Get back!" 'Canarmee yelled. The Grunts cowered and Elites covered their eyes to shield them from the blinding plasma blast. The Master Chief didn't twitch, however, for his visor would automatically darken. He watched plasma bolts continue to pound the open vent hole where 'Canarmee had been moments before. A grenade bounced into the

shaft, but the Separatists and the Spartan had already retreated farther down the tunnel.

The explosives and the plasma grenade detonated simultaneously. The vent shaft was filled with a brilliant sapphire flash, and the Holy Guard stationed in the room screamed out in agony as their flesh burned away to the fury of the plasma. The light slowly dimmed, but the screaming in the room continued.

The Master Chief blurred forward, swiftly followed by 'Canarmee. The two shot of the vent, which had been conveniently widened by the enemy plasma grenade. By the time John's armored boot touched the ground, he already had two primed plasma grenades in his hands. The Spartan threw the grenades at the most intact clump of Covenant inside the room, and 'Canarmee did likewise. True to the Elite's earlier prediction, most of the Holy Guard were so disoriented that there was very little fire directed at the interlopers. The Chief crouched and rolled to one side, avoiding what little plasma had been shot at him.

The five plasma grenades that the Chief and 'Canarmee had thrown exploded in a chain, pulverizing the Covenant survivors. Before they had time to recover from this second wave of explosives, they were hosed by a mix of weaponry from the Spartan, 'Canarmee, and four Elites who had dropped out of the tunnel. About half of the fifty survivors dropped, but the rest, mostly Jackals, formed a shield wall, advancing on the Separatist attack team, peppering them with Plasma Pistol fire. John and his allies were completely exposed, but their shields absorbed the damage easily. Without any leaders to direct them, the Jackals were just firing at random targets. If they had concentrated on one single Spartan or Elite, they would have at least killed or wounded one of their enemies.

The Master Chief dropped to a knee, swiftly made the switch to the more accurate Carbine, and began pouring fire into the small niches on the sides of the Jackal shields. He had already felled eight thanks to his expert marksmanship when all the Jackals suddenly fell flat to the ground. Confused, the Chief looked up from reloading his Carbine and received a nasty shock.

Five Brutes stood behind the cowering Jackals, all holding Brute Shot grenade launchers angled straight at the Chief.

John dove to one side, but it was too late. The Brutes opened fire, and the resulting explosions blew the Spartan backwards. His shields were completely drained from two grenade blasts, and a third grenade glanced off the hard surface of the floor, narrowly missing his head and detonating on the wall behind him. Plasma from the Jackals who had leapt glanced off his armor but one shot penetrated his arm, searing the skin and causing him to grit his teeth in pain.

'Canarmee and the ten Spec Ops Elites screened the wounded Chief, tossing even more grenades to distract the Brutes while they dispatched the Jackals, who had not re-formed their shield wall. The Brutes roared as they watched their forces being ripped apart. They charged as a group, thundering towards the Elites and slashing the air with razor-edged Brute Shot blades. The Elites poured plasma, needles, and Carbine projectiles at the charging Brutes. However, the ape-like creatures' natural resiliency made them very difficult to

kill. The Separatist assault force only managed to put down two of their enemies despite the amount of fire they were putting out.

Predictably, the remaining three Brutes' fragile tempers boiled over as they as their comrades fell. They smashed head-on into a single, unlucky Elite, simultaneously pummeling him with fists and Brute Shot bayonets. The Spec Op Elite's shields, though very tough, couldn't take such an assault and quickly flashed away. His armor cracked and was sliced apart as the Brutes continued their merciless attack. The Chief and the others continued firing at the Brutes, but they had to use precise shots as any misfired shot would end up killing the Elite, not the Brutes.

Dark blood sprayed over the wounded Elite, and three Brute corpses slumped on top of him. The Elite gasped in pain and made a feeble effort to push the bodies off, but soon his motions ceased â€" halted by either unconsciousness or death.

'Canarmee motioned for his squad of Elites and Grunts to cover him, then bent over tend for his fallen comrade. Like all human commandos, the Spec Ops Elites were trained with rudimentary medical skills. As the Elites, Grunts, and Spartan watched the door, 'Canarmee felt for the Elite's pulse.

"He's alive," 'Canarmee announced to the others assembled around him. He gave no further details and dragged the wounded Elite to a corner of the corpse-strewn room, taking out an aid kit as he did so. The aid kit was carried by every Spec Ops soldier; theoretically, most injuries could be treated or at least stabilized in the field. It was somewhat redundant considering the suicidal fanaticism of the Spec Ops legion, but 'Canarmee found his particular kit to be very useful.

As 'Canarmee treated the injured Elite to the best of his abilities, the others lost no time in preparing for the final assault on the Prophet of Truth. Additional sidearms in the form of Plasma Pistols were gathered for increased firepower, and two Elites scooped bloodstained Brute Shots off of the deck.

"Primitive, but nonetheless effective," remarked one Elite as he fed a fresh belt of grenades into his Brute Shot. "Just like your race's weaponry, Demon." The Spartan didn't know whether this was intended as a positive or negative statement, but it mattered not to the human. He merely nodded, the most common of his responses, and kept his eyes on the room's sole doorway.

A precious thirty seconds elapsed before 'Canarmee stood, his hands bloodied from the work he had done on the Elite's wounds. The injured Elite groaned and awoke, courtesy of the stimulant that 'Canarmee had injected into his system. A Brute Shot's bayonet had sliced through his right chestplate, and several patches of cracked armor gave testimony to the vicious strength behind a Brute's thick fist. The Chief knew of the characteristic strength that Elites displayed; though weaker than a Brute, they were still very powerful when compared to an average human Marine. Despite this, John was still surprised to see the Elite get to his feet. The alien warrior's face contorted as he suppressed a hiss of pain, but he remained standing and retrieved his Carbine off of the floor.

\_Just like a Spartan â€" he just gets up and keeps on fighting, \_mused the Chief as he crossed the guard room in a few quick strides. He took a quick glance out of the door, which had opened as it sensed his presence. "It's clear," he said, though confusion was evident in his voice. Why would the Covenant leave their most revered figure seemingly undefended?

'Canarmee was worried as well. "This is either an extraordinarily foolish move, or a dire omen of things to come. Either the Prophet of Truth is too arrogant to post guards, or there must be a greater purpose here. The Prophet may have arrayed his entire guard force around him in the Control Room, or something of that sort. This must be a trap." The other Elites gave murmured assent to their leader's statements.

The Chief nodded, but said, "Trap or no trap, we will still proceed as planned. Let the Covenant throw all they can at us â€" it'll just make Truth fall harder than ever!" At this, the Elites gave a louder roar of approval. Normally, the Spartan wouldn't speak to a team of Marines or Spartans in such a manner, but he knew that it appealed to the supercilious Elites. And, hopefully, by appealing to their arrogant sense of honor, the Spartan's position would be elevated in their eyes, thereby clearing a path for him to talk some sensible strategy into them.

John decided that there was no use in droning on about the reasons for needing a plan, so he launched straight into it. "It's not going to be easy handling all those Brutes at once. If possible, we should lure them out into the hallway, where they will be choked off at the bridge door and easy prey for us. I'm counting on Truth to be overconfident and for the Brutes to be their usual foolish selves; otherwise, if the Prophet calls his troops back into the room or the Brutes don't decide to charge out, then we will attempt to soften them up with all the plasma grenades we can muster." John paused, running through more possible ideas with his agile mind. "'Canarmee, is it possible for you to have the Hunters sent up here?"

"Yes. I will do so," the Elite replied. He turned away, conveying orders to the Separatists that had been left behind in the makeshift brig over a private COM channel.

"Good," the Chief continued. "We'll need their firepower. Once the Prophet's guard force has been weakened, we'll pick off as many as we can from a distance with Carbine fire and the Hunters' heavy weapons. When we can do no more from a distance, we'll have to go in and neutralize the Prophet in hand-to-hand combat." It was an exceedingly simple plan, but none of the Elites were putting up any objections, not to mention any better ideas.

"And we use these cannons!" squeaked a white-armored Grunt in broken English. He pointed a stubby finger to the cluster of Grunts, who had unearthed a cache of four portable plasma cannons. They were not as powerful as their larger cousin, the Shade, but would still be very useful against the mass of Covenant guards.

"We'll set the turrets up as soon as we get inside the room. They'll provide good suppression fire." The Chief was cut off by heavy, metallic footfalls in the hallway â€" \_very\_ heavy footfalls, which could only mean Hunters. The armored behemoths shambled into the room, and 'Canarmee nodded to them.

John slid a grenade in and out of its pouch idly. "Everything seems to be in place." He turned to 'Canarmee. "Anything else you'd like to add?"

The Elite climbed on top of an abandoned cargo module. He surveyed his troops silently, nodding as if satisfied with the soldiers he saw.

"You are the finest band of warriors I have ever had the honor of fighting alongside. We have overcome nearly any challenge thrown at us, including the betrayal of the Prophets." 'Canarmee paused, eyes still sweeping through his Spec Ops Elites and Grunts. "Our time of revenge is at hand. Fight harder than you have ever before. This task will be more difficult than any you have ever encountered in the past. Nevertheless, we shall fight. And we shall win." He drew his sword and raised it to the air. "Let's kill us a Prophet."

The Elites raised their weapons and roared out an alien battle cry in unison with their leader. Never one to waste time with such acts, the Master Chief slipped away to survey the Prophet's defenses with his faithful fiber-optics probe. He was in for a colossal surprise, however. The room was completely empty, save a few Brutes piloting the vessel.

Automatically, the Spartan retracted his probe and slowly returned to the room where the Separatists were assembled. In a rare display of anger he lashed out at a nearby cargo crate, snapping the module in half with his enormous strength. Never before had he been unable to contain anger; however, this time, his greatest enemy had been within his grasp — only to slip away through his fingers.

The Chief's allies turned to face him, puzzled by the sudden outburst from the usually taciturn human. "What is the matter, Demon?" inquired 'Canarmee, who had obviously forgotten the Chief's remark about the epithet of "Demon."

"See for yourself," muttered John, tossing the Elite his fiber-optics probe. The Elite strode out but soon returned, even more enraged than the Chief. He slashed at the air with his Energy Sword, roaring Elite curses to the winds.

One of the Spec Ops Commandos, clearly confused as to what was going on, asked his leader what dreadful event had occurred. "That stinking, cowardly Prophet is longer here," spat 'Canarmee, his voice choked with rage. "No doubt he is running like the spineless worm he is, knowing that we are after him."

Outraged silence greeted this proclamation. None of the Separatists could think of an acceptable response, and cursed the Prophet of Truth along with their leader. After half a minute of swearing that the Prophet would die a painful death for his cowardly act, 'Canarmee held a quick conference with the Chief, then took up his position on a cargo module once again.

"Warriors, the High Prophet of Truth has indeed proved himself to be the worst slime in the galaxy, and for that, he deserves your curses. However, we must focus on tracking him down and finding him, so we may exact revenge and justice upon him. This would be an easier task if we captured the Control Room. We could monitor all activities

aboard this vessel from that room, so it is crucial that we wrest the bridge from those filthy Brutes' grasp."

The Elites stormed out, followed by the Hunters and the waddling Grunts. That left the Master Chief alone in the room, who gave a grim smile of nothing in particular as he hurried to catch up with the sounds of battle already coming from the bridge. He arrived to find the five or so Brutes that had been piloting the ship slumped over, bodies mangled by the various weapons that had been used on them. The Elites familiarized themselves with the controls, which had been modified long ago for use by Covenant pilots. 'Canarmee quickly began to monitor various cameras and surveillance equipment that the Covenant had mounted throughout the ship.

"The Prophet is not traveling through any of the primary corridors," he reported, still watching the holographic displays intently. "He may be hiding in a maintenance tunnel, or using ventilation, as we didâ€" He stopped short as the display rotated to the main docking bay's camera. A score of Phantoms were departing from the bay, and ten more were being loaded with Brutes, Jackals, and Drones. All of their hulls were golden, in contrast the usual purple sheen associated with the alien dropships. Most likely a high-ranking dignitary, the Prophet of Truth, was on board one of them. The Chief stared, helpless; there were no weapons on the Forerunner vessel, and even Earth's massive orbital MACs couldn't hit them from this range.

'Canarmee muttered something under his breath. "He must be rendezvousing with another vessel so he may command without fear of enemies such as us. Coward." The Elite tapped a control, rotating the display to the external docking bay camera. They watched as the dropships entered the docking bay of a colossal Covenant cruiser. The space around the enemy warship rippled, and the cruiser disappeared.

The Chief cut his external speakers and opened up a COM channel with Lord Hood for a situation report. "Admiral Hood. This is Spartan-117, reporting, sir."

\_"Chief. I assume you're going to tell me your mission was a success."\_

One of the Spartan's gloved hands tightened into a fist, but he willed himself to relax and unclenched the fist. "Negative, sir," he replied, using his years of military experience to keep a calm and level tone. "Our target managed to escape before we arrived. The Prophet boarded a Covenant vessel and ran. Slipspace jump."

\_"'Our' target?"\_

John glanced at the Separatists that stood around him. "It seems that the Separatists â€" that is to say, Elites, Grunts, and Hunters â€" are no longer honorary members of the Covenant. For now, they have the same goal as I do."

\_"I see. Excuse me for a minute."\_ The Admiral paused and switched COM channels, briefly re-organizing the defense of earth. There was a rustle of static, and Lord Hood's voice came back online. \_"Very well, Master Chief. Do what you have to do to see that your mission is successful. If you need anything from me, just ask."\_

"Thank you, sir."

A background conversation ensued, drawing Admiral Hood's attention away from his conversation with the Spartan. It appeared that a Slipspace rupture had been detected inside Earth's atmosphere, accompanied by a considerable amount of panic on the humans' part. The Covenant, until now, had been charging the human planet's defenses head-on, when they could've slipped past all of that in Slipspace. However, from what the Chief could hear, only that one ship had jumped into the atmosphere.

"Chief, we have a problem," said the Admiral grimly. "A Covenant warship has jumped past our orbital defenses and into Earth's atmosphere. We believe that it's the very ship that the Prophet is on board. At the moment, however, the ship doesn't show any signs of activity. No weapons charging, no engines online, nothing. From what we can tell, its reactor is mainly idle and it's just holding position. Those first two carriers aren't showing many signs of activity, either; just one small foray on to Zanzibar Island, which was repelled. I don't like this at all."

"Yes, sir," was all that the Chief could muster up.

There was a brief pause. Then the Admiral spoke up again. "Chief, I have a question for you. Do you and your 'team' have control of the vessel you are on board?"

"Affirmative," John replied, who could already guess at Lord Hood's next command.

"Excellent. I'm assuming your vessel is capable of pinpoint Slipspace jumps, so bring that ship behind the orbital defense grid." "I'm sending you the coordinates over a secure data line. Once you've arrived, I'll dispatch a Pelican to extract you and the highest ranking Elite. That Separatist will be disarmed prior to docking with the Cairo, purely for safety reasons. I want you and that Elite to report directly to the bridge immediately and await further orders. The rest of the Separatists should remain on board your ship. Hood out."

"Yes, sir," the Chief said, and closed the channel. He relayed the Admiral's orders to 'Canarmee, half-fearing that the Elite would refuse to obey orders from a mere human. However, 'Canarmee was anxious to establish good relations with his former enemies, and he had no other immediate leader to report to, so he quickly accepted the human Admiral's terms.

The Elites quickly entered the coordinates given to them by the Master Chief and touched a few controls. The viewscreens blurred and with a whisper of light, the Forerunner ship vanished from its previous location, to appear behind a battlecluster of orbital MAC stations a millisecond later. It was one of the quickest and smoothest Slipspace jumps the Chief had ever witnessed; obviously the Forerunner systems were millennia ahead of their human counterparts.

A light flashed on one of the various holographic displays, and an Elite reported to 'Canarmee that a human dropship was inbound. Nodding to the Chief, 'Canarmee strode briskly out of the bridge. The

Spartan followed and allowed the Elite to lead him to the docking bay. They met no resistance on their path to the bay. Apparently, all of the Covenant forces had evacuated along with the Prophet. The two warriors still kept their weapons at the ready should a leftover enemy choose to attack them.

The two reached a massive set of blast doors, which could only lead to the docking bay. Mechanisms whirred and the slabs of metal slowly drifted open to reveal a cavernous bay. The bay seemed even larger because it was largely abandoned, save a few cargo modules, and the only remaining ships in the bay were a quartet of Covenant Seraph fighters.

\_R&D might find those useful,\_ thought the Chief as he and 'Canarmee descended to the bay floor in a grav lift. His boots touched the strange stone / metal hybrid deck with a soft \_clank\_. After confirming that the area was clear, 'Canarmee disarmed himself in compliance with the Admiral's request. Through the translucent energy shield that cut off the bay from the vacuum of space, John could see the familiar gray Titanium-A outlines of a Pelican dropship. A light flashed in his HUD, indicating a incoming transmission on a private channel. He opened it.

"Spartan-117 here."

\_"Chief, we'd be much obliged if you'd let us in. Unless you'd prefer to stay on board with your new alien buddies,"\_ said the dropship's pilot over the COM.

The Spartan in question turned to 'Canarmee. "They need to get in. How do we lower these containment shields?"

"We don't," answered the Elite. "This Forerunner energy wall has two modes. One of them is the solid, damage- and object-resistant state you see now. The other mode isâ€" He walked over to a holodisplay on the bay's wall and hit a control, and the energy shield shifted to a nearly transparent state. "â€"a semipermeable field which allows solid objects to slip through the field, but retains the atmosphere in the bay. The Lords' technological achievements truly are remarkable, aren't they, Demon?"

John had to agree. R&D wouldn't just be interested in all the wonders that the Forerunner ship held; instead, they would have a field day with all that techno-crap. Hopefully, some of those technologies could be utilized by the humans for the war effort.

"Pilot, you're clear to come through," the Chief reported.

\_"You sure, sir?"\_ asked the pilot. Doubt was clear in his voice.

"Do it."

\_"Sir, yes sir!"\_ With that, the obedient pilot shoved away his fears and hit the Pelican's thrusters. It rocketed through the field into the bay, completely unscathed. The pilot engaged the dropship's landing gear, and with a rush of exhaust, it settled to the bay deck.

'Canarmee and the Master Chief quickly got on board. The pilot turned



around, felt a sense of relief as he saw that the Elite was unarmed, and gave the Chief a thumbs-up. John returned the gesture, glad to see a friendly human face. The pilot flipped down his flight helmet's visor, tapped a few buttons on the control console. The Pelican's landing gear retracted, its engines flared and the dropship shot of the ship bay.

Barely a minute passed by, but the Pelican had already reached \_Cairo\_ station and gained security clearance from its Longsword fighter screen. The pilot maneuvered into the station's ship bay with practiced ease, set the Pelican down and released the seals on the dropship's rear hatch. The Chief hit a panel to drop the hatch, and jumped out, closely followed by 'Canarmee. A welcome party had already assembled to greet them. A fire team of five Marines were assembled, still wearing their armor and helmets after the recent Covenant attack on the station. The leader of the team, a Filipino Sergeant, stepped up and saluted the Chief, simultaneously whispering to the Chief, "What's the Elite's name, sir?"

John returned the gesture, snapping on a private channel and replying, "Cura 'Canarmee." The Sergeant nodded turned to the Elite and saluted also, respectfully. Obviously Admiral Hood had briefed these Marines extensively, as he wanted to have good relations with his potential new allies from the start. To everyone's surprise, 'Canarmee returned the human salute. Encouraged, the Sergeant began his speech " which, the Master Chief assumed, was also drilled into the soldier by Lord Hood, judging by its wording and formality.

"Welcome aboard the UNSC \_Cairo\_, Cura 'Canarmee. My commanding officer, Fleet Admiral Sir Terrance Hood, sends his regards and looks forward to meeting with you in private. My squad and I will escort you to him. As you can see, we are only lightly armed, as a sign of our good will. I see you are disarmed as well; forgive us for requiring that, but we do not distrust you. It is just a temporary precaution until a more formal alliance has been made."

\_Good will, indeed. Is that why all of the Marines still have M6Cs?\_ mused the Chief, somewhat humorously, who had noticed the sidearms that were clipped to the soldiers' sides. At least the soldiers \_looked\_ calm enough, for the Marines' hands were hanging loosely at their sides, not resting on their pistols.

'Canarmee nodded. "I understand. Please lead on."

The Sergeant turned on his heel and marched off, followed by his four Marines, John, and 'Canarmee. The Spartan nodded to several Marines that he remembered for heroic action during the counterboarding effort. The bodies had been cleaned up, but blood still stained the steel deckplates. Lines of bullet holes, plasma scoring, and occasional piles of wreckage were all remained as evidence of the battle that had claimed two hundred Marine lives on board the \_Cairo\_.

Some Marines with haunted looks in their eyes stared warily at 'Canarmee as he was led up to the command deck. Obviously, these Marines had lost friends to the Covenant and were extremely suspicious of the Elite. 'Canarmee ignored these accusing glares as best as he could, and distracted himself by hand-polishing his armor, which had become grimy after crawling around in unused tunnels and

fighting on board the Forerunner vessel.

The unusual group of seven beings stepped into an elevator that still contained a few discarded Battle Rifle clips and a lone brass 9.5mm shell casing. A Marine stabbed the control for the command deck and the elevator lurched up at a breathtaking speed. Within seconds the elevator's doors parted to reveal the half-wrecked command station. Blackened areas indicated where fires had once raged and shell casings carpeted the deck. The Covenant boarders had launched a last-ditch assault on the command deck and had been slaughtered, though not without taking many Marines with them.

Two Marine sentries stood next to the elevator, armed only with SMGs as the threat level on board the \_Cairo\_ had been lowered to minimal. They nodded to the Chief and 'Canarmee. "Admiral Hood has been waiting for you two, sir." John, 'Canarmee, and the Marine fire team promptly marched onto the raised command platform, where the Admiral stood. The five Marine escorts saluted the Admiral, who thanked them, and returned to their normal duties elsewhere on board the station.

That left John and 'Canarmee alone on the platform with Admiral Hood. The Spartan snapped to attention at the sight of a superior officer. 'Canarmee, dutifully, did likewise.

"At ease," the Admiral said.

Thus began a long conversation, where the Chief's only part was explaining the events that had unfolded on Delta Halo. After this lengthy explanation, 'Canarmee and the Admiral retreated to the Admirals quarters to discuss alliance matters in private while the Master Chief took a short shower and had a long meal after the harrowing experience on a second Halo. John was then given a dead Marine's former quarters and proceeded to grab some badly-needed sack time.

In the meantime, 'Canarmee and Admiral Hood had created a temporary alliance that would be in effect until the Covenant were driven away from Earth. Then, the highest-ranking Elite left alive would be sought out and a formal alliance would be made. The Elites, Hunters, and Grunts officially adopted the designation given to them by the Chief, "Separatists." 'Canarmee used the \_Cairo\_'s COM system to broadcast news of the alliance to all of his surviving brethren, openly using Covenant channels as a sign of defiance and contempt.

John awoke some two hours later, restless from a nightmare that had haunted him throughout his slumber. A flash of tentacles and grotesquely twisted flesh, screams of humans and Covenant alike, and the unearthly shrieks and groans of the Flood had awoken the Spartan. The Master Chief had a sick feeling in his gut, one that told him that he hadn't seen the last of the Flood.

Shaking his head to clear it of the lingering nightmare, John activated and slipped into his MJOLNIR armor. Decades ago, it would've taken a team of expert techs to assemble the armor and fit it onto the Spartan; however, thanks to advances in technology and the countless times John had assembled the suit himself, the task had become a simple one.

As he set the suit's helmet firmly on his head and locked it firmly in place, the Chief noticed a message indicator light flashing in his HUD. He tapped a control with his chin, opening the brief text communicat  .

\_Chief,\_

\_Report to the secure black ops briefing room at 0400 hours. Details at the briefing.\_

\_- Hood\_

The Chief glanced at his HUD's general information display and noticed that he had awoken at precisely the right moment â   0356 hours. John nodded, hoping that the mission he was about to be briefed on would allow him to re-engage the Covenant, and hopefully Truth as well. He walked briskly out of his quarters and proceeded to black ops briefing room, where the most audacious and top-secret missions were concocted on board the \_Cairo\_.

John entered the darkened briefing room and found that the only two occupants besides himself were 'Canarmee and the Admiral. He saluted Hood and took his place by a holographic display pedestal.

"Welcome, Chief. I see your timing is impeccable, as usual," began Hood with humor regarding the Chief's strict adherence to his orders. "'Canarmee and I have agreed on a temporary cease-fire and alliance between the humans and the Separatists. I assume you're not interested in the finer details of that, so I reserve those details for HighCom."

The Spartan nodded and glanced at 'Canarmee. The alien warrior favored him with an even, respectful glance. Though the Chief thought it was a little quick to make such a decision, he was grateful to have the Separatists as allies rather than enemies.

Admiral Hood entered several commands into a personal datapad, and the holopedestal flickered to life. A mass of blue resolved into a model of Earth, with a tiny island on the east coast of Africa highlighted in red. The model rotated until the patch of red faced the three figures in the briefing room. The Chief could see three sleek warships in the atmosphere of holographic Earth; obviously representing the Covenant intruders. Hood tapped the highlighted portion, and a box appeared to its right. Data figures cascaded through the box, and a title appeared on top: Zanzibar Island.

The Admiral tapped the island again and the scrolling data winked away, leaving the holographic Earth clear once more. "Zanzibar Island," he said. "The one place where the Covenant decided to stick their noses into. Out of all the major population centers and military bases on Earth, they chose to invade none of them. Instead, they drop a battalion-strength force for a seaborne assault on Zanzibar. This seems to be an even more foolish move when they can just incinerate the position with their capital ship weaponry, but Zanzibar has virtually zero military value anyway. Therefore, the conclusion HighCom and I have reached is that Zanzibar must have some other importance to the Covenant, enough so that they will take hundreds â   maybe thousands â   of casualties to capture it unharmed."

"Agreed, sir," replied the Chief. He had reached the same conclusion himself based on personal experience where the Covenant behaved similarly to secure a location that they wanted. On Sigma Octanus IV, the Covenant had spared an entire human city " but not its occupants " so they could retrieve an object sacred to them, a crystal that had led both the Covenant and the humans to the first Halo.

"Currently, there are two companies of Marines from the 3rd Earth Defense Brigade stationed on Zanzibar Island, and are most likely engaging the enemy as we speak. However, If not reinforced soon, those Marines will most likely be overwhelmed. I would send down a wing of Pelicans to help them out, but they're too slow. The Covenant ships would probably destroy them long before they can land." The Admiral eyed John and 'Canarmee. "So, you two will provide those reinforcements via HEV drop pods. And, hopefully, you'll keep the Covenant from discovering or taking whatever is so important to them at Zanzibar."

"Understood," said John. 'Canarmee nodded as well, eager to have another crack at his former allies.

"Good. I knew I could count on you two. Still, although you two are undoubtedly the most skilled soldiers on board this station, you will need assistance. Fortunately, \_Cairo\_ is home to another elite team, who will complement your abilities nicely. Master Chief, You may not have fought alongside them before, or even known of their existence, but I don't think I can spare the time to explain all these subtleties." He tapped a COM device and spoke into it. "You may proceed to the secure briefing room now."

"ODST Team Eight is a select squad of ten extremely skilled individuals, part of the 1st UNSC / ODST Special Forces Operational Detachment. Team Eight operates under the Navy Special Weapons chain of command rather than the normal Marine structure, much like yourself, Chief. They have been selected to receive intense and specialized training from the day they entered the military, and are much like the Spartans except that they are not inducted at childhood. However, they have received biological augmentations such as muscular growth hormones, skeletal toughness-enhancing drugs, and neural function enhancers, in addition to their extreme training. For the lack of a better scientific explanation they are slightly toned-down versions of the Spartan-IIs, for they have extraordinary strength, reflexes, and intelligence many times that of ordinary humans, not to mention veteran military expertise and experience.

"Team Eight and their sister teams, more colloquially known among the few who know of their existence as ODST Delta Force, are named after the ancient United States' elite 21st century combat team, and the section of the UNSC they belong to " the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers," Hood continued. "They are equipped with the most advanced UNSC equipment and armor, aside from the MJOLNIR Mark VI system. Like the MJOLNIR, their specially designed suits are remarkably resilient, equipped with powerful shielding, and exponentially increase their strength and reflexes. You will find the Deltas most useful in this operation, and as I mentioned before, they will be nearly as good as Spartans watching your back."

At that moment, the Admiral was interrupted, because the door to the

secure briefing room had just slid open. Ten fully armored figures marched into the darkened chamber, helmets at their sides. Team Eight was comprised of nine males and one female, and all had the looks of hardened, veteran warriors. John could clearly see their resemblance to the Spartans, as the Admiral had noted. Their space-black armor suits gleamed in the light of the holographic projector, and John noticed that the Deltas' armor had the luminous, glowing slits that were indicative of shielding, just as the Admiral had said. Their shoulders were still marked with the golden comet of the Helljumpers, but the usual lettering below the insignia that usually identified a soldier within his unit had been replaced with "Delta T-8." Overlaid over these insignias was a number corresponding to each Delta's operational number in the squad.

One of the Deltas stepped up, clearly the leader because of the "L" designation on his shoulder patch. "ODST Team Eight, reporting, sir!" he said, snapping to a crisp salute as he did so.

The Admiral returned the salute and greeted his new guests. "Eight Delta Leader Peter Wallace. It's a pleasure to finally meet you again. I assume you and your squad heard the entire briefing over the COM, as my orders specified?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I guess I'm free to proceed, then." He turned to John. "Master Chief, I'm asking you to lead this op. You probably have the most experience in high-risk ops such as these." Admiral Hood paused, thinking. He didn't want to offend Eight's Delta Leader, and more importantly, he didn't want to insult 'Canarmee, so he decided to put in a small statement for their benefit. "Delta Leader and 'Canarmee, I know that you are both elite warriors as well, possibly on par or nearly on par with the Spartan himself, but my decision is that the Chief is the best man for this job. You will take all your orders from him. Understood?"

"Understood," said Delta Leader. Everyone's eyes flicked to the Elite, who contemplated the Admiral's statement for moment.

"Understood," he growled.

"Excellent. Thank you, 'Canarmee." Lord Hood turned back to his portable COM and began to issue orders to his bridge staff. "Lieutenant Parsons, I want you to contact the tug Lusitania and have us moved to the predetermined coordinates in the NAV database. Call in two heavy destroyers for cover while we are en route, and have the carriers Essex and Thor fill the hole while we are temporarily out of position."

"The Cairo is currently en route to a position where you will be hot-dropped straight on to Zanzibar Island," said Hood, returning his attention to the team assembled in the briefing room. "Chief, I suggest that you and your team gear up for the mission, and report to drop pods A1 through A12 by 0430 hours. Good luck, and may God be with you all." With that, the Admiral gave a final salute to the lucky dozen and hurried out of the briefing room, returning to the bridge where he was needed.

The Spartan surveyed his new squad, nodding as if pleased by what he

saw. "Delta Leader, you know your team much better than I do, so you may equip them as you see fit. However, I will need to know what each Delta specializes in, so I can use their abilities to our advantage in combat."

"Yes, sir," said Delta Leader in a slightly awed voiced. Evidently, even the Delta was amazed at being in the same room as the legendary Spartan, never mind participating in an op with him. "Deltas! You all know what weapons you want to have your hands on. Choose what you excel in. Delta One, pack a ruck with C12 as a little present to the Covenant. Delta Four, make sure you bring the necessary electronics equipment along. Delta Nine, you're free to customize your S2 as you see fit, but make it fast. You heard Admiral Hood; the clock is ticking.

"As you may have guessed, Chief, Eight Delta One â€" or just Delta One, since we are not operating in tandem with other Delta teams â€" is our resident demolitions officer, and Delta Four is our electronics expert. Deltas Two and Three are excellent scouts and stealth operators. Deltas Five through Eight are all general-purpose infantry, deadly with Battle Rifles and typical weaponry. Delta Nineâ€" " he turned to the only female operator in the squadâ€" "is our one and only sniper. She can nail a buzzing fly at 400 meters and will decapitate the enemy with or without a spotter. I can snipe pretty well myself, but my primary advantage is my speed â€" I can sprint faster than any of these ladies in Team Eight. That's the lot of us, sir."

"Thank you, Delta Leader." John then turned to the Elite, who was all the more alien when standing in a room filled with humans. "'Canarmee, if you prefer Covenant weaponry, you may wish to return to the Forerunner vessel and have my permission to do so."

'Canarmee shook his head. "No, I shall defeat the Covenant with the very weapons they deemed to be so 'primitive.' Human armaments or Covenant armaments, I will slaughter them all the same."

Silently, the Chief agreed with 'Canarmee's mentality of "I'll use anything as long it kills." There was more alike between the Elites and Spartans than he had first realized. "In that case, let's move out. Team Eight, 'Canarmee and I aren't quite familiar with the \_Cairo\_'s deck plan, so we would be grateful if you led the way for us."

The twelve warriors filed out of the briefing room, and ODST Team Eight led the way to every warrior's favorite place â€" the armory. Once again, John was eager to get his armored gloves onto clean UNSC weapons again, and quickly grabbed himself a Battle Rifle and Shotgun for equal effectiveness at long range and close-quarters-battle, or CQB. He grabbed eight fragmentation grenades and filled his suit's ammunition pockets with ten Battle Rifle clips and six packets of twelve Shotgun shells each. The Chief also decided to fill a rucksack with C12 explosives and Lotus antitank mines in case they became needed.

'Canarmee equipped himself with a Sniper Rifle and a pair of SMGs. Although the human weapons seemed quite small compared to Covenant weapons, their trigger guards had been designed for use by both bare-handed users and soldiers with armored gauntlets, so the Elite could slip his hands through them without any trouble. However, the

M6C was downright puny in his hands, so he chose an M6E as his sidearm. The M6E fired 12.7mm rounds, the same caliber as the M6C, but the M6E's rounds were denser, equipped with additional chemical propellant in the casing, and featured a brutal armor-piercing / high-explosive combination tip for maximum damage. The more powerful pistol was also considerably larger than the standard M6C due to its extended eighteen-round clip and felt like a proper sidearm to 'Canarmee. The eleven humans decided to choose the M6E as well; its increased power would be needed against the tough Brutes. 'Canarmee strapped on a belt of ammunition pockets to hold his weapons' magazines and pulled a bandolier of grenades over his head.

Finally, the Delta, John, and 'Canarmee took turns stepping through the shield recharging station, as all of them had deactivated their shielding systems. The human and Elite shield systems were very similar, and 'Canarmee's shields were charged by the human system without incident. The fully armed team marched out of the armory seconds later, a fearsome sight even to their allies. They wasted no time in hurrying to the row of HEV drop pods reserved for them and strapping in. John gave final orders over his squad's private channel, which he had created specially for them.

"Once we hit dirt, our first priority is getting a situation assessment. We don't want to start shooting blindly without any idea what's going on. I'll forward on any intel Admiral Hood sends me to you, but don't be counting on much; he's got enough on his hands without having to help us as well. Our next priority is to rally the Marine survivors and push the Covenant off the island. I'll give more specifics once we engage in combat. My last is request that is that you, 'Canarmee, stay behind us until the Marines verify that you're not an enemy. Got it?"

\_"Yes, sir!"\_ roared the Delta over the COM.

\_"Agreed,"\_ was 'Canarmee emotionless response.

There was no time for any more talk. At that moment, the Master Chief heard a series of loud, explosive \_clicks\_ above as the drop pod detached itself from the \_Cairo\_. The Chief's stomach, along with his team's, lurched sickeningly as the HEVs entered the outer layers of Earth's atmosphere, began to stabilize for the descent to Zanzibar, and cut twelve fiery streaks through the clear blue sky.

\* \* \*

>Heh. I cheat you off with the "none" for the Author's Note, but what is this, eh? <p>That was a rather unenthusiastic response to Chapter 8, but I sort of deserve it because of the time I took to write it. It seems like I have been forgotten. Or, otherwise, people are reading my story, only they don't review it. Hopefully, this is true, because it would suck if nobody read this crap, never mind the reviews. I'm considering adding in the "Dr. Halsey Kelly" thing sometime in the future. Possibly, if people want an explanation for it and if I ever get enough time on my hands (see below). And if I haven't mentioned this already, enjoy the action while you can, a lot of beefy plot will be revealed afterward.

Part of the reason these chapters have been taking longer, besides my earlier excusesâ€|er, reasons, is because I've been drafting them up first, then extensively revising, editing, changing, and making them

better for a long time before I actually submit it. In my opinion, it's best to turn out high-quality chapters at a moderate / slow pace than churn out shit chapters at a very brisk pace. If I had more time, I would be submitting new chapters at a moderate pace, but seeing as I don't, they're coming out s l o w. Sometimes I tend to over-detail, in my opinion, so let me know if I am. And also, FFN tends to butcher my work occasionally, so don't be too surprised if that happens.

For those of you who still read this, I'm hoping you've already gotten used to waiting.

Until next time.

## 11. Fire From The Sky

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

\*\*A/N:\*\* One cycle equals sixty units equals 120 minutes equals two hours (FFN doesn't take equals signs anymore). Also, I know my setting of \_Zanzibar\_ doesn't match up exactly with the map in the game, but I felt that the boundaries set by the map were way too confining. And in case you were wondering, obviously the UNSC Military Calendar does not take into account any time zones of Earth, as the sun set on \_Zanzibar\_ well past midnight. Name of the Elite, Grunt, and Hunter faction changed to "Separatist," in favor of increased formality. Three dashes (**\*\* - - - \*\***) indicate a passage of time or minor setting/section change, in place of asterisks which FFN also no longer accepts. They seem to accept very few symbols nowadays, but I can't do anything about it.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

I've recently heard of FFN punishing writers for responding to reviews, and although I haven't confirmed this, until it is disproved or if the ban exists and is lifted, I can no longer respond to reviews. Sorry.\_

**\*\*Chapter 10: Fire From The Sky\*\***

**\*\*0242 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| EAP Wind Power Station 7, Zanzibar Island, Tanzania, Africa.\*\***

Captain Summers was taking a short breather in Dog Company's command bunker after helping to shore up the beach defenses when the Marine manning the radar station called him over. Sighing in tired frustration, he hauled himself up and asked, "What is it, Private Hunter?"

Private Hunter stabbed at the radar display with his finger. "Three bogeys, sir, coming in just under Mach 1 from the east. No word from Ace HQ about any inbound air support, and no friendly tags either, so it's safe to assume that they are Covenant aircraft."

Summers, exasperated, was about to order the AA gunners to knock out the aircraft when the COM system on the far side of the bunker beeped. A Marine leapt up to examine it.

"Incoming transmission, Captain, but it's on a Covenant band, sir."



It took a moment for the meaning to sink into the soldier's fatigued mind. "Those Covenant aircraft â€" they must be trying to contact us."

"Put it on now. Tell the 88 gunners to hold their fire but stay on the alert. No telling what these tricky bastards might be up to," said the Captain.

"Yes, sir."

The COM system crackled and then came to life. \_"This is Elite Field Master Fura 'Folamee,"\_ growled a faint and tired voice, characteristic of those weary from days of ceaseless battle. \_"If you humans are receiving this messageâ€|I beg you not to destroy us. We Elites, Grunts, and Hunters are no longer members of the Covenant, and are now your honorable allies. If you choose not to believe usâ€|then ask your own Admiral before you open fire."\_

\_So Admiral Hood wasn't kidding,\_ noted Captain Summers dryly. The Admiral had sent a transmission on all UNSC channels regarding the alliance, but Summers hadn't quite believed the story until now. He shot a look to Captain Allen, who was poring over charts of Zanzibar Island on a foldout table. Allen, who was visiting D Company's CP to coordinate the defense plan with Summers, returned the glance with a slight smile. Any type of reinforcements â€" whether Separatist or human â€" would be greatly appreciated by the two Captains.

The Captain quickly returned the transmission, keeping any scorn or suspicion out of his voice. "Field Master Fura 'Folamee, this is human Captain Elliot Summers, co-commander of this post. I know of this alliance, and give you permission to land on the pads to the rear of this power station." However, he didn't allow the 88 gunners to relax, in case the entire thing was a ruse.

\_"Thank the Gods,"\_ said the listless voice on the other end. The Phantoms floated in closer to the human positions and began to descend as their pilots spotted the landing pads, floodlight in anticipation of their arrival. 88mm AA cannons and 12.7mm heavy machine guns tracked the dropships until they landed. It never hurt to be cautious, and besides, most of the Marines had spent lifetimes battling the Covenant. They were bound to be suspicious of their old adversaries.

Summers cut the transmission and stepped out into the night. It was pitch-black momentarily, then the full moon appeared through a bank of clouds, casting an eerie glow upon Zanzibar Island. He glanced down at his soldiers on the beach and could dimly make out the defensive line. The moonlight glinted off the human weapons' barrels, creating the illusion that there was a row of mirrors planted in the ground below. The Captain looked to the pads, where the Phantoms had just landed.

A troop of approximately forty Elites and Grunts descended from the three Phantoms. The majority of the Separatist soldiers were covered in filth, soot, and most of all, blood. The Elites seemed too exhausted to even make an attempt at cleaning off their armor, which they usually kept in pristine condition as a sign of their superiority. Numerous Separatists sported wounds, both slight and major. Though fatigued, all of the Separatists still seemed to be able to fight.

The single Elite that wore the gold-plated armor indicative of Elite commanders separated himself from the Separatist ranks and approached Captain Summers. The Marine had left his command bunker and strolled out to greet the Field Master. To all the humans' surprise, the gold-armored Field Master offered a four-fingered hand to Summers, which was taken by the Captain after he got over his initial shock. The Covenant had extensive knowledge of all aspects of human life, despite the fact that they were trying to exterminate the humans. Of course, most of the UNSC forces didn't know that, and were continually shocked by the aliens' knowledge of their mannerisms.

"Greetings, Captain. I, as you already know, am Field Master 'Folamee. I am the commander of the all the remaining Separatists from the Covenant carrier Prophet's Flame. Nearly all of us were eliminated by the treacherous Covenant. We barely managed to board the Phantoms with our lives. I believe that we carry some divine luck with us, for we were not disintegrated by the carrier's weaponry. Perhaps they are even more frightened of damaging the Ark than I initially expected."

Summers didn't understand the last statement, but decided that there would be time for explanations later. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, 'Folamee, but it seems like you and your Separatists have walked straight into another battle. A large Covenant assault force is currently headed straight for this location, and intend to take it by force. My orders are to hold this station by any means possible, and I have no intention of disobeying those orders. You can stay and assist us if you wish, and that would be greatly appreciated. However, there is no clear chain of command between Separatists and humans, so I cannot order you to stay. The decision is yours."

'Folamee twisted his mandibles into a grim smile. "Even if I wished to depart from this wretched place, our Phantoms were not refueled before we departed the Prophet's Flame. I doubt that they even have enough power to lift off again."

Inwardly, Captain Summers was relieved that the Separatists would remain on Zanzibar to help the human forces. "Very well, then. I'll give you a short assessment on our current situation, which you can relay to your soldiers as you please.

Not counting your forces, we have two companies of Marines in total â€" that is to say, approximately 320 â€" available for defense. We've entrenched ourselves firmly on the island, with three lines of defense, as you can probably see from up here in the moonlight. In addition to the standard small-arms weaponry, we have forty mortar tubes set up, for we were unable to obtain heavier artillery pieces. An aircraft carrier stationed nearby will provide us with periodic air support, but this will become unavailable if we are forced to engage the Covenant in hand-to-hand combat because friendly fire will become a serious concern. Finally, we needn't have much fear of enemy artillery as an air strike disabled or destroyed most of the Covenant Wraiths over an hour ago. We are heavily outnumbered, unlikely to be reinforced, but we hold the strong point. I aim to keep it."

'Folamee nodded agreeably. "An Elite could not think of a better

plan. Though one thing troubles me. Do you know why you are even defending this position, Captain? Is it an important location to you humans? I see no great purpose for the Covenant to send such a large strike force to capture this post."

Captain Summers scratched the stubble of his unhelmeted head. "I'm just as clueless about it as you are, 'Folamee. I'm just here to do my job."

"I see." The Field Master stroked his armored mandibles thoughtfully. "I doubt even those mindless Prophet-slave Brutes know. It is in that damned Prophet's nature to hide things from those who serve him. Who can analyze the workings of such a twisted mind?"

Summers again restrained himself from asking about the Elite's curious statements, and changed the topic as a distraction. "Er, Field Master, if you or your soldiers require weaponry, we have enough extras to provide you with some," he said, noticing that quite a few of 'Folamee's followers were unarmed. He pointed towards a bunker at the far end of the cliff. "Our temporary armory is located over there."

"I am thankful to be placed alongside such a capable commander," remarked 'Folamee gratefully as he headed off to re-equip himself, motioning for the Separatists to follow.

Several more minutes slipped by, in which the Elite Field Master placed nearly all of his troops alongside the humans in the beach trenches. He selected a few expert snipers to join their human counterparts on the seawall, and retreated to D Company's CP to do some final planning with the two human commanders. With each passing moment, the Covenant armada drew ever closer to their mysterious goal of Zanzibar Island.

\*\*\_ \_ \_\*\*\*\*  
> <strong>

Veteran Elite Ako 'Onomee stretched his muscular arms out in anticipation of the coming battle. Like most of the Separatists and Marines that surrounded him in the slit trenches, he preferred engaging the enemy to sitting in a slit trench and playing the waiting game. 'Onomee ran his left hand over alien contours of the Battle Rifle that he had selected. He had seen humans cut down many Covenant soldiers with this type of weapon and hoped that the rifle would do the same in his hands.

He glanced to his right, taking in his environment as any good soldier would do. A Marine was there, holding a long-barreled projectile weapon with a box attached to its side. From the box ran a belt of large, wickedly sharp projectiles that fed into the Marine's gun. 'Onomee remembered the weapon's name now; it was "gun machine" or something of the sort. "Machine gun", that was it. His former squad had the bad luck to run straight into a machine gun's line of fire. He knew from firsthand experience that was capable of spewing deadly projectiles at a fast pace, but that was a bonus for him in this case.

As for the Marine himself, the Elite saw a cold, hard look in his eyes. 'Onomee instantly recognized that look; it belonged to only the steel-hearted soldiers that were revered so much in Elite

culture.

'Onomee couldn't say the same for the human to his left, however. This Marine was shaking slightly and had a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead, even though a cool breeze was blowing constantly through the trench. Nervously, he clicked the safety of his Battle Rifle on and off repeatedly. 'Onomee had seen many apprehensive Elites who were entering their first battle, and they had behaved similarly to this human. Though the Elite felt no great love towards his new allies, he decided that it would be for his benefit to enter battle with cool-headed soldiers at his side.

"Don't worry, human. It's not as bad as some say." Surprised, the Marine nearly dropped his Battle Rifle, and glanced at the Elite in a half-shocked state.

"Iâ€|uh, wellâ€|" he stammered, not knowing how to respond.

The Elite growled impatiently. "This is your first battle, isn't it, human?"

He nodded dumbly. "Yes, it is." He stopped, still searching for words. "I'm completely greenâ€|I mean, I don't have any experience, unlike most of the other Marines here. I'm only nineteen years old."

Having studied the human lifespan, 'Onomee knew that this was a very young age for a human to be in the military. He nodded in understanding; Elites had often joined the Covenant military as soon as they came of age. Some found the initial experience to be somewhat alarming.

"Worry will only make your first battle your last. Try to focus on aiming your weapon and stay on the alert. Remember: there is no time for worry, human. If the battle tips in the enemy's favor, stay close to me. No Brute scum will ever defeat Ako 'Onomee in single combat," the Elite boasted, though he actually had slain a considerable amount of Brutes on board the Prophet's Flame.

The Marine gulped, then shook his head and replied, "You're right, 'Onomee. Thanks." He paused yet again, then saluted the Elite in a bizarre move of respect. "And you can call me Taylor, sir. Private Ryan Taylor. Not 'human.'"

'Onomee gave a low chuckle. "'Sir?' I thought you humans reserved that term for your commanders."

"Yeah, we do," said Taylor, who let the implications of what he had just said sink in.

"I am no commander, merely a Veteran," 'Onomee said, bemused at how quickly the human assumed that his rank of "Private" was lower than 'Onomee's "Veteran." Unfortunately, the Elite had not been able to research the human military ranking system, so he would have to take Taylor's word for it. 'Onomee noted with some satisfaction that the human Marine was less jittery before. The Private gazed out to sea calmly, watching the shadow on the already darkened horizon grow steadily larger.

The three COs decided that it was best to pound the incoming Covenant

vehicles with the human mortars to soften them up, and then coordinate their beach forces to open fire at the same time. This would hopefully decimate the first few ranks of Covenant vehicles and troops, after which the snipers would open up as well, cutting down any exposed enemies. The Separatists and humans on the beach would reload under the cover of sniper fire and suppress the Covenant when the snipers ceased fire. It was a simple, tried-and-true method of continuous fire, further supplemented by the mortar teams that would have an easy time hitting the stationary landing forces. Between these three groups, the Covenant would be slowly pounded to dust.

Captain Summers stood on the edge of the cliff where the command posts and anti-aircraft cannons were perched, slapping a helmet onto his close-shaven head. He flipped down the helmet's transparent information display over his right eye, switched it to a night-vision setting, and saw that the range between the Covenant armada and his position had closed dramatically.

In fact, they were within 7,000 meters, the maximum range of the M353 mortar that was used by UNSC Marines.

As soon as the statement "Shooting gallery's open, boys!" came down to the Marines manning the M353s, forty rounds were dropped into the tubes and were sent whistling towards the enemy. The mortar teams made minute adjustments to their weapons in order to compensate for the Covenant vehicles' forward velocities, then fired off a second volley, which was closely followed by a third. Two Pelicans had airlifted in twelve of the UNSC's multipurpose weapons / ammunition capsules filled with mortar rounds, so there was no shortage of shells for the Marines to fire.

Captain Summers, Allen, and Field Master 'Folamee watched the results through high-magnification sniper scopes and binoculars. Some rounds splashed harmlessly into the ocean, either overshooting or falling short of their targets. Conversely, with so many Shadows and Spectres clustered together, the majority of the mortar rounds found something to strike. Gouts of flame marked mortar detonations, which were usually followed by the explosion of the vehicle that a round had struck. In fact, the mortar teams needn't even destroy the Covenant transports; damaging an antigravity pod would send a Shadow or Spectre straight into the ocean.

After the fourth volley struck, some bright light in the Covenant ranks had the sense to order the vehicles to separate, greatly diminishing the usefulness of the mortars. The Marines chose to cease fire until the Brutes and Jackals landed and greet their unwelcome visitors with 81mm high-explosive surprises.

Consulting his one-eye information display again, Summers notified his troops that the Covenant were within 3,000 meters of the power station. Behind the assault force was a trail of sinking wrecks and floating bodies, evidence of the usefulness of weaponry that the Covenant had deemed as archaic and worthless.

Not a single Marine or Elite twitched in the trenches on the beach. The only sources of light coming from the sea were the flames of the damaged craft, which were soon extinguished by the restless sea. Complete darkness fell like a curtain once more.

All of Marines and Elites chose one of the dark approaching shapes and trained their weapons on to them, after which the only movement they made was the blinking of their eyes. Most Grunts were not present; they never had the stomach for war, anyway, being the relatively docile race they were. Still, there were some Grunts that had weathered many battles and were not fazed by the prospect of entering another. Anxiousness buzzed through the air, but no Elite or human wanted to be seen as a coward, so any observer who looked upon them with a flashlight would've noted that a wall of seasoned, hard-eyed warriors were on the beach that night.

Summers watched the range decrease steadily in his eye display. Beside him, he knew that Allen and 'Folamee were focused on the same thing with their own equipment. He clicked on the customized COM channel that encompassed Charlie Company, Dog Company, and the Separatist platoon, waiting for the inevitable moment to arrive.

"200 meters! Beach team, let 'em have it!" the Captain roared as the first bolts of plasma appeared from the Covenant attack vehicles.

A deafening roar broke the stillness that had settled over Zanzibar Island. Swarms of yellow-orange tracers filled the night air, slashing through the front row of Shadows instantly. Rockets erupted from the trenches, smashing into any object that they came into contact with and swallowing it in a ball of fire. Plasma spewed from the various vehicles that the Covenant employed, dissipating harmlessly on the beach fortifications. The return fire from the shocked Covenant troops was sparse; for now, the defenders' plan was working. Confusion reigned supreme among the Brutes and Jackals as their vehicles were jammed up behind the wrecks of the front ranks.

Sharp cracks replaced the full-automatic barrage as the snipers, with their night-vision scopes, began to pick off the disorganized Covenant soldiers on the open-air vehicles. Mortars sailed through the air once more to sow discord among the already-disoriented Brutes and Jackals. It was a full two minutes before the Covenant closed the final 200 meters and landed their first troops on the beach, which were promptly killed by a mix of Battle Rifle, sniper, and machine gun fire.

Although the Covenant had lost a sixth of their strength in the opening minutes of the battle, their vast reserves of troops slowly began to turn the tide. Piles of bodies and wrecked transports served as cover for the middle and rear ranks of the Covenant battalion. Mortars were able to bypass these obstacles, but they were too few to kill many of the enemy. As if this weren't enough, the sandbag/instacrete barrier in front of the beach trenches was quickly being eaten away by constant plasma fire. Four and a half minutes into the battle, the Separatist and human coalition finally took their first casualties — two Grunts killed by plasma and a Marine decapitated by a Carbine bullet.

Shell casings formed huge piles in the trenches while bullets and plasma continued to form reciprocal lines of fire between the Covenant and human/Separatist positions. 'Onomee shot three Brutes in their unprotected heads and slaughtered a squad of Jackals with a fragmentation grenade. He ducked down to reload his Battle Rifle while the Marine to his right mowed down any Covenant caught out in

the open with his M297.

Private Taylor was caught up in the intensity of the battle and in his own adrenaline rush, his fear shoved away to a distant past as he ran through eight Battle Rifle clips in a matter of minutes.

"\_Captain Summers, sir, casualties are mounting and we're running low on all types of ammunition! There's too many of the bastards â€" we'll be overwhelmed in a few minutes unless we're resupplied!"\_ shouted a Marine Lieutenant desperately over the command channel.

The Captain swiftly ran through his options. If he tried to resupply the beach forces, the exposed ammunition runners would undoubtedly be killed by Covenant fire. He glanced at the massive lines of Covenant corpses and yelled, "Negative, Lieutenant! I'm ordering a full retreat of the beach! Wait for my command!"

He switched to the all-hands channel. "Snipers and mortar teams, switch to thermal sights, keep those Covenant pinned! Beach team, smoke grenades, up and over those barriers, then fall back! Fall back now!"

Separatists and Marines tossed blinding smoke grenades into the Covenant positions and abandoned their trenches. Mortar shells and sniper rounds streaked into the smoky cloud, pinning down the Covenant while the beach team retreated. The enemy rounds appearing through the smoke and striking with deadly, thermal-sight-guided accuracy had an impact on the Covenant morale. For a while they cowered behind cover, as the first soul who looked out would have his head blown off by three or more snipers.

The Marines, Grunts, and Elites reached the barricade that had been erected across the seawall entrance, leapt over it, hastily resupplied themselves, and rushed to find firing positions on the wall. As Captain Summers watched the Marines, Elites, and Grunts retreat, he knew that the defenders' plan was beginning to fall apart. He had not counted on having to retreat so quickly, and it was now too late and too dangerous to call in artillery support from UNSC surface ships that he had initially been planning on. Friendly fire was an extreme concern at this point.

Captain Allen decided that C Company's rocketeers needed a better vantage point, and made that opinion clear to his Marines. "Mitchell, Saxon! Take two squads of rocket jockeys and bring them up to this bluff! Get to the beachside cliff, set up floodlights to illuminate the beach, and pound the Covenant with rockets from above!"

"\_Yes, sir,"\_ replied the two Marines as they picked out twenty rocket-wielding soldiers and led them up to the bluff. They reached the beachside cliff in thirty seconds, where they had a clear view of the Brutes and Jackals who were behind the cover of bodies and destroyed vehicles. Nearly two dozen rockets flashed down to the Covenant, who were not expecting an attack from an elevated position to their flank. A second wave of twenty-two rockets followed, throwing fountains of bloody sand and body parts in all directions. Floodlights were switched on, blinding the already-confused Covenant even further and making them easy targets for the walltop defenders.

One Marine had leaned out too far over the cliff and was shot through the chest by a keen-eyed Jackal sniper. His buddies quickly hauled him back and brought him to the infirmary, yelling for him to hang on. The Marine was lucky; had he been shot ten centimeters up the vertical, he would've been a goner.

The same could not be said for many of his comrades who had died on the beach. A hundred humans and Separatists had been killed trying to prevent the Covenant from landing, but those deaths were not on anyone's mind as an enraged Brute commander ordered a charge on the seawall. Animal roars rang out from the beaches as the Brutes and Jackals readied themselves for the charge, and shot out the floodlights.

The surviving Marines and Separatists did two things. They steeled themselves to meet the charge. And they prepared to meet whatever fate awaited them. Victory or death.

\* \* \*

><strong>0357 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) â™| Covenant carrier <em>Prophet's Flame<em>, holding position in Earth's stratosphere.\*\*

Karkatus leaned back in his Leader's chair and allowed himself a small smile of victory. From the combat reports that had been streaming in from the Brute ground commander, it was the island would be taken within half a cycle.

The holographic image of the Prophet of Truth appeared over his chair's armrest. \_"How goes the conquest, Ship Leader? I know that you lied to me before. The Prophets can discern the truth from a whisper, and you were a fool if you thought you could outsmart me. Will you tell me the truth this time, or do you wish to be branded as a heretic?"\_ questioned the Prophet in a soft but deadly voice.

Karkatus was caught completely by surprise. He had heard rumors of Prophets pulling truth from thin air, but this was the first time he had witnessed it firsthand.

Of course, Karkatus had no way of knowing that the Prophet had jumped into Earth's atmosphere and seen everything for himself. Truth had purposely cut his new cruiser's engines and jammed all Covenant scanning systems directed at his craft, so that it would really seem as if he had known all along that the Brute was lying.

Karkatus bowed his head feverishly before replying. "Noble Prophet, the Island will be in our grasp in thirty units! I lied merely to buy myself more time; my Shadows and Spectres were not yet filled with soldiers when your last communication came in. The result will be the same either way, I swear it! Your Excellency, the island will still be ours!"

Truth stroked his bearded chin pensively. \_"Very well, Karkatus. You are lucky that I am so generous and forgiving, even though I am in a terrible mood at the moment. Fail me this time and I will be forced to dispose of you for good."\_ The hologram winked out.



The hefty Brute stared at his chair's armrest. "Yes, Holy One," he muttered, though the communications channel had already been terminated.

He sat motionless for a moment and opened a channel with the Brute commander on the beaches. "Ground Leader Spartacus! I want those humans wiped out within the next half-cycle!"

"Ship Leader, that may not be possible. The humans are offering stiff resistance, and there are a few Elites scattered amongst their ranks. The fight has been difficult,"\_ replied Spartacus apologetically.

"Damn! I should have personally slain those wretched Elites by myself!" thundered Karkatus in a fit of rage. A murderous look crossed his face as he grated out his reply. "I don't care what you are facing, just have the island by my set time or I will have your head on a silver platter for my next meal!"

"But Leaderâ€"\_"

"No excuses!" roared Karkatus. "I told you â€" do it or die!"

"Yes Leader,"\_ said the Ground Leader meekly, and closed the connection.

Karkatus exhaled and smashed his meaty fist down on the chair's armrest, breaking the rather fragile equipment that it contained. \_Those incompetents under my command will get me killed,\_ he thought, then returned to sitting and waiting. Suddenly, like another inspiration from the Gods, he remembered something â€" a group of things, rather â€" that could tip the scales in his favor.

"Send in the Ghosts!" he ordered his communications officer. With any luck, the single-seat attack vehicles would help to cleanse the humans from the land before the Brute's own time limit ran out on him.

\_Yes,\_ he thought, the victorious feeling returning once more. \_The Island will be taken in time. And I will be the rewarded and honored beyond my dreams.\_

\* \* \*

><strong>0400 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar)  
<strong>\*\*â™| EAP Wind Power Station 7, Zanzibar Island, Tanzania, Africa.\*\*

A vicious war cry rang out from the Covenant Brute ranks, reverberating throughout the power station. The first Covenant soldiers were beginning to emerge from cover. As before, the initial attackers were shredded by sniper, Battle Rifle, and SAW fire. When the defenders on the seawall began to reload, the rest of the Covenant made their move, only to be cut down by a volley of rockets from above.

The Brute commander decided that attacking in waves would only result in more futile deaths. Brutes and Jackals streamed out from behind their cover, covering the beach in a seething mess of flesh and weapons, still yelling their battle cries. 7.62mm, 9.5mm, and 14.5mm

rounds cut through the charging aliens. Jackals attempted to form a shield wall but were cut short by a series of mortar detonations just behind their wall.

Bodies were trampled underfoot as the alien horde stampeded onwards, regardless of casualties. The Covenant force had been considerably diminished by the thousands of rounds that they had absorbed, but the Brutes and Jackals still smashed into the wall with fanatic vigor. Primitive Brute tethers and grappling hooks were tossed upwards and impromptu stairs were made from the piles of multi-purpose bodies that carpeted the beach. From Captain Summer's standpoint, it looked for all the world like a medieval storming of a castle, which was ironic considering the supposed "technological superiority" and "intelligence" of the Covenant. Apparently, that so-called "intelligence" did not apply to Brutes.

Climbing was no easy task, as the Covenant assault troops quickly discovered. Marines attached "archaic" titanium-composite bayonets to their Battle Rifles, using the wickedly sharp blades to slice through the climbing ropes. Others fired their weapons straight down, killing those attempting to scale the wall. Grenades fell from the wall like a rainstorm from hell, tearing great chunks out of the packed Covenant below. In the rare occasion that a Brute or Jackal made it to the walltop, the Marines and Separatists were ready. Shotguns and SMGs, as always, were deadly at close range. Bodies tumbled off of the wall, further obstructing the efforts of the Covenant attackers.

'Onomee tossed away his empty Battle Rifle and grabbed a Shotgun. He enjoyed the kick of the weapon against his shoulder as it discharged a 3.5" shell into a Brute's head. The Elite fought close to the Marine Taylor — the two had formed a slight bond during the action on the beach, as comrades in battle will invariably do. 'Onomee's shield caught several Carbine rounds, and he put his back to the wall to let the protective field recharge while taking the time to reload his Shotgun. He glanced at the Private next to him, who was loading a pair of submachine guns.

"Well, Taylor, is the battle not an exhilarating experience?" he questioned the human, noticing that the human showed no trace of fear whatsoever, having changed from the nervous and half-hearted soldier he had been.

Private Taylor grinned and said, "Duck." He raised his SMGs and took aim at an ambitious Jackal that had just popped its head up over the seawall. The alien leapt onto the rampart, not even bothering to reactivate the shield that it had shut down to climb up the seawall. The Jackal managed to shoot 'Onomee once with its Plasma Pistol when its unprotected torso twisted sickeningly from thirty bullet impacts. Taylor kicked the corpse off the wall with his armored boot. "You're right, 'Onomee. Once you're in it, there's no time to be afraid. The only thing to do is kill."

\_A philosophy all warriors should adopt,\_ thought the Elite as he slipped the final shell into his Shotgun, pointing it over the wall in time to foil the plans of a Brute and three Jackals. Their buckshot-riddled bodies, by pure chance, hit the ground and rolled to a stop at the feet of Ground Leader Spartacus. The Leader himself, however, was protected by a screen of Jackal shields as he surveyed the battle at its heart. He kicked the bodies away and felt hot rage

rising up inside him as the defenders on the wall continued to make fools out of his troops.

"You, take a hundred Brutes and two hundred Jackals, and attack that wall's entrance! Show no mercy to the infidels, crush them with our might. Casualties are of no concern, for a sacrifice for the Great Journey will bring holy transcendence!" he commanded a nearby Brute.

The lower officer growled assent and pushed his way back through the Covenant horde to select a group of fresh soldiers. The three hundred Brutes and Jackals detached themselves from the mob attempting to scale the seawall and dashed towards the wall's entrance.

Blinding clouds of sand arose as their feet pounded on the loose material. Corpses of Brutes and Jackals dug furrows in the sandy dunes as the 4th Platoon, D Company opened fire on the charging Covenant. Brutes fired Carbines and Brute Plasma Rifles in an attempt to suppress the Marines, but the humans had the defensive advantage of the barricades and hunkered down with heavy weapons. 4th Platoon had several M297 SAWs along the barrier as well; their high fire rates gave ample discouragement to the Covenant attackers.

Two dozen Brutes wielding Brute Shots sprinted up to the front of the assault team. The grenade launchers threw shrapnel into the Marines' exposed, unvisored faces, leaving six dead and thirteen wounded. Therefore, by the next salvo of grenades, most of 4th Platoon had their heads down. This gave the Covenant the opportunity they needed to cover as much distance as possible without any opposition.

Captain Summers saw the first Brutes thunder towards the seawall entrance in the periphery of his eye. He turned to size up the attack and also noticed that many Marine wounded and dead were being dragged away from the barricade, back towards the infirmary deeper inside the power station. Hastily, the Captain ordered a squad of walltop troops to reinforce the entrance position, for if that opening fell, then so would the chances of the Marines surviving this assault. They would be forced to abandon the wall and retreat to the final defensive line â€" the bunker-and-trench system that had been erected earlier as a last resort. After that was breached, perhaps the survivors could pull back to the cliffs and inside the power facility, where they could continue to harass the Covenantâ€¦assuming there were any survivors.

The situation was beginning to look bleak for the humans and the Separatists. A group of Brutes had gained a small foothold on the seawall and the breach was growling larger as more Covenant swarmed into that area. Marines and Elites fought fiercely and managed to hold the Covenant back at small choke points with explosives and heavy gunfire. Despite this, they were repeatedly overwhelmed within minutes, and before long the Covenant held a quarter of the entire seawall.

To matters even worse, 4th Platoon was forced to abandon the entrance as Covenant literally took the position by force of bodies. They left behind antipersonnel mines for the Covenant, but the explosions were swallowed up as Brutes and Jackals flooded in, plasma flying wildly in all directions.

The two Captains and 'Folamee agreed that it was time to pull their troops back to the last defensive line. "Retreat! All troops, retreat to the bunker line! Get off that wall â€" it's coming down!" shouted Allen, desperation creeping into his normally solid voice and his orders becoming increasingly less formal and more frantic. The humans and Separatists did not hesitate to obey. Marines carried wounded buddies on their shoulders, Elites threw grenades to cover the retreat, and Grunts did what they did best â€" panic.

A small contingent of Marines and Elites were surrounded and trapped on the walltop. They fought doggedly on as the enemy closed in around them, many with blood flowing from ragged wounds. Grimly, they depleted the ammunition in their Shotguns and SMGs, picked up their fallen enemies' weapons, and continued the fight. It was a brave but ultimately vain effort. The last Elite fell just as Captain Summers pulled a detonator, flipped off its safety cover, and hit the trigger.

There were several amber flashes at the base of the seawall, and a deep, rumbling shockwave ripped through the area. The seawall crumbled and fell, bringing hundreds of Jackals and Brutes to their doom with it. Screams of the wounded and dying filled the air along with the dust and smoke of the detonation.

Captain Summers stared at the line of rubble without remorse, and thought of a classic Marine line that applied to this situation â€" \_One down, fifty billion to go.\_

It was true. Already the Covenant survivors were battering away at the third line of defense, and the weary defenders struggled to hold them at bay.

Private Taylor's ears were ringing from the nonstop sound of gunfire and his hands were numb from the recoil of constant firing. He quickly exchanged Battle Rifle and Shotgun for a M297 that had been dug into the side of the trench and surrounded by sandbags. The air crackled as a 12.7mm heavy machine gun mounted in a nearby bunker opened up. It was behind these machine gun positions that the Marines and Separatists rallied, driving the Covenant back for a time.

Taylor's teeth rattled as he fired off a sustained burst into a cluster of Jackals. The aliens didn't have the strength to hold their shields steady against the 7.62mm rounds hammering against them, and were quickly cut to pieces. The Marine fired a full hundred rounds of full-automatic into another unsuspecting group of the vulture-like aliens, then allowed the M297's barrel to cool for a moment before resuming fire. 'Onomee, who had just arrived next to the Private, tossed a fragmentation grenade just to the rear of a berserking Brute. The resulting explosion tossed the Brute forwards towards the trench, and 'Onomee fired a Shotgun into it to make sure it stayed down.

The mortarmen abandoned their posts and grabbed conventional infantry weapons. Their mortars had been rendered useless by the fact that the Covenant were in too close of a proximity for the M353s to operate effectively.

Meanwhile, Captain Summers armed himself with a typical infantry combat load-out of a SMG and a Battle Rifle, while Allen slung his

sniper over his soldier. Though commanders, he, Captain Allen, and 'Folamee were soldiers through and through. Therefore, they were not content with merely watching the battle, especially in dire circumstances such as these. The Marines and Separatists on the ground below would need all the help they could get. Granted, the three COs would not expose themselves to extreme danger, as they were important to coordinating the defense efforts, but they would still support their troops as much as possible. Allen yelled for his rocket jockeys to fall in as well, for there were too many Covenant soldiers with clear shots at the Marines on the bluff.

Summers quickly descended from the rocky bluff, firing off several bursts from his BR55 as he did so. He felt a blast of hot air from above as 'Folamee launched a rocket. Once at ground level, Allen's Marines sprinted to join the defenders in the trenches while the three leaders climbed up to a heavy machine gun post slightly behind the front line. The machine gun was mounted on a platform next to the primary windmill, and unmanned due to the fact that the Marines and Separatists were already severely strapped for personnel.

'Folamee launched the other rocket in his launcher, dropped the empty weapon and proceeded to man the 12.7mm machine gun. He growled in approval as a formation of Brutes was torn to shreds by the heavy-caliber slugs, having no problem targeting them in the darkness â€" Elites naturally had better vision than the typical human. The platform shook slightly from the recoil, forcing Captain Allen to abandon it in favor of a more stable sniper position.

The third line was taking a severe beating but it seemed to be holding. 'Onomee, Taylor, and the others were keeping up steady streams of fire from their automatic weapons positions that were effective in holding back the Covenant horde.

'Onomee saw a green bolt streak through his peripheral vision and felt blood spray against his helmet. He jerked his head left to see Private Taylor slump down out of the M297 he had been manning. The Elite was about to yell for a human medic when he saw that the human had been shot through the head and that Taylor was beyond help. He bowed his head momentarily in sorrow and mourning for a fellow warrior, resting the Private's Battle Rifle across his chest as a mark of respect.

The Elite wasn't quite sure why the human's death affected him, even though he just felt momentary grief. Three days ago he would've killed the Marine without remorse and moved on. Even with the alliance in effect, he felt no great love for the humans. Still, 'Onomee was sorry to lose any allies at the present moment, given their predicament. That was the reason, that was it â€" right? He couldn't possibly have befriended a human.

'Onomee was thrown back into reality as another Carbine bullet clipped the top of his helmet shields. He quickly pushed the Marine's body away and took Taylor's place at the M297 position. He jammed down the weapon's trigger with cold anger towards his enemies. Anger at their betrayal of his kind. Anger at the stupidity of those who followed the Prophets, only to be slaughtered in their service and betrayed for all their hardships. Anger at all the principles in which those pigs believed. The SAW spit bullets, growling and roaring as if in agreement with his fury.

The Elite's first victim was a Carbine-wielding Brute directly in his line of fire, who had most fired the shot that killed Taylor. 'Onomee sent far more bullets into the Brute than was necessary, hearing a dry \_click\_ as the belt ran dry. He lifted a fresh box of 250 7.62mm rounds from the Marine's corpse, locking it into the M297 with a \_clack\_ and feeding the belt into the receiver.

On a bare windmill service catwalk high above, Captain Allen had chosen his place to set up shop. For a moment he surveyed the chaotic scene below. Gunfire beat a steady drum on his ears and an occasional flash would appear, marking the detonation of a grenade. Muzzle flashes and plasma fire lit up the scene, eerily silhouetting troops on both sides. The fire was thick and fierce from the defense, but as before, they were unable to halt the creeping Covenant advance. It was a recurring nightmare to the C Company officer, but he took his mind off of it by practicing his sharpshooting.

So far, Spartacus's forces had failed to actually reach the trenches, but some of the more bold Brutes had given their lives mere centimeters from the line. He rotated the front ranks out of action, allowing rested soldiers from the rear to continue the fight. The personnel-strapped Marines and Separatists could hardly afford this luxury; with every single one of the defenders in fighting condition engaged in some form of combat. The wounded were patched up to the best of the medics' abilities and kept on battling against the odds.

After a while, however, the Covenant horde had been whittled down significantly, and they were beginning to strategize more and throw themselves mindlessly forward less. Jackal shield walls, though unoriginal and often ineffective when faced with high-caliber rounds and rockets, remained common. Brutes favored the primitive "blow something up in their faces and charge while their heads are down," but after this failed several times with heavy casualties, they began to formulate new plans.

Eventually the Covenant settled on copying their enemies' strategy: dig in behind cover and use precise fire to depopulate the enemy ranks. The bone-weary humans and Separatists took this as a blessing, leaving the snipers to watch for anything suspicious while they eased up on their triggers and slumped down in the trenches to rest.

The period of respite was short-lived, however. One observant sniper saw dark shapes on the ocean and brought up his night-vision scope, revealing a large force of Ghosts approaching to renew the fight. He quickly reported this to the commanders, who relayed it to the troops. Exhausted Marines and Elites lifted Jackhammers and readied machine guns to greet the incoming Ghosts. The stench of gunpowder had barely cleared from the area; now it was to return in full force.

"Hold your positions," said Captain Summers through the all-hands freq, presumably addressing all defenders who felt faint of heart. "Do not, under any circumstances, abandon your positions unless ordered. We are on our last defensive perimeter, and must keep it at all costs â€" or be completely overwhelmed." He paused, then decided to spit out the thought on his mind, clich  though it was. "If we are to fall, we'll take as many of those Covenant bastards with us. It has been an honor to be your commander, and fight alongside you. Give 'em hell. Good luck, men." He clicked off his COM, then sighed.

Fine words, but in reality, what good did they do? He'd rather see a wing of Pelicans light up the night sky with 70mm rounds and drop a whole battalion of veteran Marines to wipe out the Covenant, but it was more likely that they would kiss and make up with the Brutes.

In a burst of insight, Summers realized that it was possible to radio the Apache for some form of close-in air support, but then he realized that anything sent would be far too late to give any assistance, save mortuary detail. If only he'd thought "if only anyone had thought of that an hour previously. Unfortunately, at the moment the carrier was not operating independently; rather, it relied on orders from the Brigadier General, who had placed the air support under the command of the frontline commanders " namely, Summers himself " so that those commanders could call for support when they deemed it was necessary. The Captain cursed loudly. Funny how inspiration always tended to strike too late.

Next to him, 'Folamee opened up with the .50-cal again, sending the massive rounds streaming downrange to rip apart the lead Ghost. This drew return fire " a purple-white streak of a Beam Rifle shot narrowly missed the Elite's elongated forehead. Being more heavily shielded and armored than the humans, not to mention more reckless, 'Folamee stood his ground and returned fire towards the source of the fire. Captain Summers could imagine, without difficulty, a group of hapless Jackals being torn to pieces in the darkness.

Rockets erupted from the trenches, illuminating narrow, snakelike paths before detonating on the Ghosts. Blue intermingled with orange as the single-seat attack craft exploded. They chose to flood their engines with power rather than divert the energy to their weapons; and thrusters flared into cerulean streaks against the black of night. 'Onomee sent a burst of rounds into the bulbous front of a Ghost. Tendrils of flame erupted from the wrecked machine, and the Ghost directly behind it crashed into the burning chassis.

The mechanized assault boosted the morale of the Covenant infantry, prompting them to charge on after their Ghosts. Summers had been dreading this, but expected little else. 'Folamee cursed as his machine spat a last round and the bolt locked open. Hurriedly, he reached down to one of the many ammunition boxes scattered around the weapons post and lifted out another 12.7mm belt. As deadly as the heavy machine guns were, there were too few to make a large physical impact on the battle, but at least had a psychological impact on the Covenant troops. The foot soldiers cast wary eyes on the muzzle flashes from above, which were out of most Covenant weapons' range, fearing that a heavy round would come their way at any second. Therefore, 'Folamee and the Marine .50-gunners stayed at their posts, giving a steady, reassuring thump thump thump to the ears of the Marines and Separatists in the trenches, even as the Ghosts threatened to overwhelm their position.

The battle for the trench quickly became a disorienting mess of plasma and bullets in the darkness, soldiers of all races screaming in pain and range, shrapnel flying everywhere and explosions burning into the combatants' eyes. Marines readied Shotguns as the Covenant foot soldiers neared the trenches. 'Onomee had his own pump-gun propped up against the side of the trench, still resolutely pouring M297 rounds into the Covenant gauntlet closing in around them.

War brings with it particular, defining acts of heroism, and the best

in soldiers is often revealed in the worst of situations. The Battle of Zanzibar was no exception. Even as Brutes and Jackals poured into the trenches, Marines and Elites refused to retreat, banding together inside bunkers for their heroic last stands. 'Onomee abandoned the depleted M297, calmly scooped up his Shotgun and dashed to the nearest bunker.

Inside the concrete bunker, thirteen Marines and a Spec-Ops Elite had already gathered. No one spoke for a long while, and the only movement came from soldiers slapping fresh magazines into place. The Marine Sergeant gave his final words to his men, the black-armored Elite drew his Plasma Sword, and all waited nervously with weapons trained on the door. Animal-like snarling and roaring could be heard from the trenches, coupled with yells of pain from the Marines and Separatists who had been trapped and cut down by their merciless foe. Then, a brief and sudden silence fell upon the scene, and 'Onomee prepared himself for his last glorious battle.

Captain Summers watched Covenant troops flood the trenches, overwhelming all resistance remained. He took aim at one of the dark shapes and pulled his weapon's trigger, but nothing happened. He dropped the Battle Rifle from eye level and leaned back in despair.

"That's it. It's over," he said hoarsely, to no one in particular.

"Not while one of us still draws breath," replied 'Folamee. As if to reinforce his statement, he continued to fire his weapon in defiance, though it had little real effect.

Summers authorized the final retreat, for all the good that did. Only the toughest Marines and Elites managed to break loose and get out of the trenches, and even then most of them would be shot in the back by Covenant sharpshooters.

The Captain left 'Folamee and clambered down from his perch to rally what few soldiers remained. He grabbed a few Battle Rifle clips and stuffed them into his ammunition pouches before turning to watch the survivors coming in. They were like walking corpses pulled fresh out of the graveyard, covered in multicolored blood and soot, dragging their feet in exhaustion, and sporting at least a single plasma burn apiece. He gave a murmured "good job, soldier" to each returning Marine, calling medics from the infirmary to patch up the wounded.

The soldiers gave no visible sign that they had heard Summers. Some wandered to the relocated armory to resupply themselves, others gulped down water from their canteens, but the majority collapsed on the ground, panting, watching the dark shapes on the beach through haunted eyes and mouthing silent prayers.

The Covenant, however, had not taken the three defensive lines without substantial effort and loss of life, and Spartacus was wary of allowing his troops to proceed further without rallying them first and allowing them to rest. He did not know the exact amount of enemy warriors remaining, either, which further justified his decision to halt for a few units. The Brute figured that the short delay would have no ill effect on his timetable and hungrily tore into some raw meat and water brought by aides. It was good to be part of the



winning party.

A lone blue-armored Elite also joined the small crowd of Marine survivors, scarred and unarmed, having lost his weapon in the chaotic mess of the battle. Summers tossed him an SMG along with several clips. They landed at the Elite's feet, and he looked slowly from submachine gun to Captain before accepting the weapon with a grateful nod.

The cacophonous din of battle slowly faded as the Covenant crushed the remaining bits of resistance in the trenches. Captain Summers took a head count of the remaining men. All told, there were twenty Marines, eleven of which were from his company, and three Elites. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, shaking his head slowly as he viewed the remnants of his forces.

Yet at the same time, Summers gave a bitter smile. They would all fight to the end, with death an absolute certainty, yet for a purpose completely unknown. It was never a soldier's duty to question orders, merely to carry them out. But Summers found the whole futility and pointlessness of the situation humorous. They would probably manage to kill a few more Brutes and Jackals out of the millions in the Covenant army, delaying them for a few minutes from taking a nondescript power station that seemed to have no inherent military value whatsoever.

There was no point in reflecting on that now. It didn't matter, anyway; within the hour none of the Marines or Separatists would have anything to worry or think about anymore.

Field Master 'Folamee and Captain Allen descended from their posts shortly after, both having depleted their ammunition while attempting to pick off a few more Covenant soldiers. They held a debate with Captain Summers as to how the final defense would be organized, but since the end result was already a forgone conclusion the argument was completely halfhearted.

It was finally decided that the last stand should take place inside the narrow confines of the power station's inner hallways, where a series of barricades could be erected. They would be able to balance the overwhelming odds by holding the horde of Covenant Brutes and Jackals off at choke points, where only a few of the enemy could pass through at a time. Even such a tiny number as twenty-two Marines and four Elites, including both Captains and the Field Master, could hold their own in such a situation — that is, until their ammunition ran dry. When that time came, well, there were always bayonets, and afterwards, a free ticket to the realm of death. Heaven or otherwise.

As the pitiful remnants of the defenders stood and began to file into the power station, Summers turned to gaze at the ocean one last time.

"Hold on!" he said slowly. Allen and 'Folamee, the last two still within earshot of Captain Summers, turned and gazed quizzically at him, then followed his eyes to the midnight-blue sea.

The rippling reflection of the moon was there in the water, as it should have been, but there were also a dozen or so bright crimson-gold dots, slightly too large to be stars or celestial bodies

of any sort. He looked up to see the flaming objects growing larger by the second as they descended to the surface, aligning themselves into a line apparently parallel to the power station.

For one heart-wrenching moment he thought that the Covenant had won the battle in orbit and were beginning to glass Earth. However, the Captain noted that the twelve dots were clustered very tightly and were quite small, and the rest of the night sky was devoid of any disturbances. He managed to calm himself down with this reasoning, and now looked up curiously rather than fearfully.

Summers tapped a helmet control, magnifying the display of his tiny HUD. He squinted up at the objects and identified them as drop pods of some sort, but he couldn't tell whether they were human or Covenant, and they were falling quicker than he had thought. He barely caught a glimpse of a flaming comet insignia stamped on the nearest HEV, the reflective paint gleaming by light of the pod's brake thrusters before all twelve embedded themselves in a neat row, not twenty feet from where Summers, Allen, and 'Folamee stood. He saw that the pods read "Delta T-8" rather than "ODST," but had no idea what that meant. Still, they were obviously human pods " which was a huge relief to Summers " but what good would twelve extra soldiers do, even if they were ODSTs?

The HEVs' hatches hissed and shot off explosively, and Captain Allen had to leap to one side to avoid one stray hatch.

Captain Summers was about to bring his cigarette up to his mouth, but lowered it, mouth slightly agape, at the sight in front of him.

\* \* \*

><strong>0434 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) " |  
EAP Wind Power Station 7, Zanzibar Island, Tanzania, Africa.<strong>

John unbuckled himself from his HEV, scooped up his equipment, and surveyed the scene around him. Technically, that was unnecessary, for he had already had extensive views from aerial reconnaissance drones. The UARCs had been crucial in guiding the drop pods to a specific landing zone. Thankfully, the advanced Delta HEVs were equipped with thrusters capable of maneuvering them to a precise LZ, and therefore saving some of them from dropping straight into the Covenant horde, which John knew covered much of the island by now. So, there was nothing unexpected in the situation " massed numbers of Covenant, few human survivors, or the awed stares of Marines unused to seeing ten Deltas, a Spartan, and an Elite appearing in front of them. It was all typical in a Spartan's day of work.

John saluted the two Captains, who still held higher rank than him, and nodded in recognition of 'Folamee. The Deltas did likewise. Noticing 'Canarmee, the Field Master clicked his mandibles in approval.

The Captains bid the Marines to stand at ease. John could ill afford sparing time for any further formalities; it was time to get down what he, 'Canarmee, and the Deltas did best. First, however, he needed a more detailed situational report than what he had guessed.

\_Talking out in the open isn't the best idea,\_ noted John as a hailstorm of plasma bolts cut through the darkness and melted holes in the recently vacated HEVs. Judging by the numbers of the Covenant he had seen from reconnaissance feeds, it would be futile to resist outside of the power facility. With that in mind, he beckoned the others to follow, given orders over his suit's external speakers as he turned.

"Deltas, 'Canarmee, fall in. We're taking this inside the power station. Captain Summers, sir," he said, reading the name off of his HUD's Marine tag reader that scrolled data next to Summers's figure, "my squad and I have orders direct from Fleet Admiral Hood, and we'll be assuming control of this op. I need you to brief me on the situation here â€" the number of Marine survivors, if any, tendencies of the enemy that you have noticed, your weapons and ammunitions status, and any other relevant information that you would consider important. Lead us to the survivors, and I'll take over."

Summers gulped slightly, then nodded. "Yes, Chief. Two companies of Marines were assigned to defend this installation against Covenant attack. For what purpose, I don't know, but the Covenant did come. They really hammered us â€" over a thousand Jackals and Brutes, fully mechanized, though our own SeaHawks knocked out their Banshees and Wraiths before we made contact with them. It didn't matter much; they just kept coming until they breached our first two lines of defense. Their commander doesn't seem to have any regard for the amount of casualties that we inflict; we must have killed hundreds, maybe thousands of those bastards, and the only strategy they truly employed was basically a mindless charge. A force of Ghosts arrived as reinforcements not long ago, and the Covenant penetrated our final trench line. That was when most of our forces were slaughtered. Only twenty Marines and three Elites, excluding ourselves, managed to retreat. Also, we have a number of wounded inside the power station, being treated in our makeshift infirmary, but only the severely wounded were brought there, so they are too incapacitated to be of much use. And as for weapons and ammunition, we have a decent amount, but I doubt it will be enough against the numbers we're facing."

The Chief digested this information for a few seconds before delving further.

"You mentioned Elites," noted John. "I know that we've allied with the Separatists, but how did they manage to make it here?"

"Oh. That. Well, Field Master 'Folamee-" he hooked a thumb at the Elite- "and his boys managed to fight their way off of a Covenant-controlled ship and landed their dropships here on Zanzibar since they were running low on fuel. And once they were stuck here, there was nothing left for them to do except keep fighting."

"And air support," mused the Chief. "What about that?"

"The Apache aircraft carrier battlegroup is stationed nearby, and I could've called for support, butâ€"|" Summers paused, then decided to spit it out bluntly. "I forgot."

John nodded. It wasn't uncommon for commanders to forget such details in the heat of battle, and at least the Marine Captain hadn't ordered a carpet-bombing of the entire area.

"Well, if that carrier is still on station, we can still put it to good use," said the Chief. "Since the Covenant have control of the entire beach, the pilots won't have to worry about friendly casualties."

"Affirmative, Chief." The Captain led them through a heavy door, into the station's secure power control center. "The survivors are stationed in one of the corridors in this section. We'll regroup with them, and then I'll call in an air strike."

The group rounded a corner, the report of a Battle Rifle rang out, and Captain Summers dropped to the brushed metal floor.

"Friendlies!" yelled the Chief angrily. A nervous sentry at the barricade had shot his own Captain, all because he didn't bother to identify his target, or even notice that the contact on his miniature HUD's motion tracker was yellow. The pure stupidity of some soldiers absolutely appalled the Spartan.

John rolled Summers over to check on his condition. Luckily, the Battle Rifle rounds had been deflected by the Captain's breastplate, where the armor was thickest, though if the sentry had fired off another burst, the 9.5mm bullets might've penetrated the Marine armor. As it was, Summers would only have a bruised chest. The Chief breathed a sigh of relief as Summers got shakily to his feet, coughing, before giving the sentry a serious verbal thrashing.

The Master Chief noted the condition of the surviving Marines and Elites: battle-fatigued, wounded, and so twitchy that they would shoot the first thing that rounded the corner. It didn't help that all three Elites were Minors. John had been hoping that he could add another veteran warrior to his already-formidable team. Instead, he had three more lives to protect; though tougher than Marines, the inexperienced blue-armored types were rarely threatening as enemies, and couldn't be much different as allies. It would've been easier if he, Team Eight, and 'Canarmee were alone and free of baby-sitting duty.

Captain Summers finished his rant at the sentry and attempted to contact the Apache for the air strike, but all he could raise was static.

"Chief, I can't raise the Apache on my helmet COM. Not to worry, I dropped this thing in the water a couple days back and it's been finicky ever since. Just one second."

Summers borrowed another Marine's helmet, accessed the Apache's channel, and wrinkled his brow in frustration.

"Strange. It still isn't working. What in hell is wrong withâ€¦|hold on. Chief â€œ" could you check the status of the COM channels?"

The Spartan nodded and quickly ran a COM diagnostic. An opaque box appeared in the left of his HUD, and data streamed through it. Short-range, squad-level communications were intact, obviously, but strangely, even the MJOLNIR's powerful COM system reported all long-range communications as inoperable. A second later, the suit identified the problem â€œ" "Channels Jammed." Curious. The MJOLNIR usually could break through most Covenant jamming, and the Mark VI

was the most advanced system yet.

"We have a problem, Captain. It seems that the Covenant are jamming our long-range communications. How, though? So far I've never encountered a ground-based system of theirs that has been capable of doing that."

Captain Summers swore. "That's because it probably isn't ground-based, Chief. There's a Covenant warship parked in the sky not too far from here. That must be the source of the interference."

"Of course it's a capital ship. I forgot that how the Covenant got in here in the first place," John thought. "No air support, then. That's fine. I've managed without it many times before."

He glanced around again. This confined setting was never where his Spartans operated best, and if the Deltas were similar to the Spartans, they wouldn't do much good in these hallways either. Much of their advantages against the Covenant were lost in such an environment.

Since venturing out spelled certain death, there was only one way to go deeper inside.

John turned to Summers. "Captain, I want you to hold this position with you and your men. I'll leave 'Canarmee and a sack of Lotus mines here to complement your forces. Captain Allen, you'll be our unofficial tour guide. We want to see what kind of attractions this place has."

\* \* \*

>FYI, there are now two sections for Author's Notes, as you can see (at the top, and right here, if you have difficulties understanding that or are new to here). More important, chapter-related information will go at the top, and info that can be relayed to you later will be placed here. <p>I had an unexpected 10-day absence after camp (which was awesome, by the way), which added to the time it took to finish this. Also, being away for so long caused me to forget most of what I had written, so forgive any inconsistencies or repetitiveness. My writing has degraded significantly, no doubt.<p>

Holy shit. That's all I have to say. The amount of errors in some of my chapters astounds me, not to mention questionable wording in some places. Rewrites of some chapters will most likely be released some time after Chapter 11.

Well, I guess I really did bring it upon myself. Barely anybody reads this anymore. Only a few loyal readers remain; the majority of them have deserted me or forgotten me (most likely the former, and I can't blame them). I'm not going to give up, though. I started this fic with determination to finish it, and I will do so, even if I get no readers at all.

## 12. Excavation

**\*\*The Great Journey\*\***

**\_\*\*A/N:\*\*** It's been a long while, hasn't it. Since the last time I

wrote my writing style and vocabulary has matured significantly, a change that I hope will create a positive impact on this fic overall. I had written half the chapter before I stopped; thus, some of you may notice a sudden change in my writing style in the middle of the chapter. I will try to modify the first half to make it flow better. However I barely even remember my own plot line, so kindly ignore any (minor) errors in continuity or repetitiveness and let me know of major ones. Names of the Elite Spec-Ops Commander have been fixed to match the official one.\_

**\*\*\_Reviews:\_\*\***

\_This isn't allowed any more, apparently. If you have specific questions ask me. I'll try to get to everyone but don't be too sad if I miss you, just ask again next chapter or something.\_

\_Much thanks to all readers and reviewers.\_

**\*\*Chapter 11: Excavation\*\***

**\*\*0436 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar) \*\*\*\*â™|  
\*\*\*\*UNSC \_Cairo\_ \_Orbital MAC Defense Station, in geosynchronous orbit  
around Earth.\*\***

Fleet Admiral Hood felt the \_Cairo\_ jolt as it was returned to its original location in geosync orbit by UNSC fleet tugs. He watched through the fore camera as the \_Essex\_ and \_Thor\_ broke from their covering position and took up a patrol pattern around the nearby \_Rome\_ battlecluster. The two carriers were, oddly, still in pristine condition. Their thick, spotless Titanium-A hulls gleamed, free of any plasma scoring, and Longswords swarmed around their mother ships like packs of bees protecting their hives.

Of course, they probably wouldn't be gleaming for much longer. The Covenant had pulled back for now, out of the orbital guns' range, but it was only a matter of time before they would grow impatient. It was obvious that, once the ground forces on Zanzibar had accomplished their mysterious objectives, the fleet would fire up their reactors and unleash wave upon wave of superheated plasma at the UNSC forces. The same tactic had been used by the aliens in the Sigma Octanus IV incident. It was one of the many parallels that could be drawn between the two scenarios. The Covenant did not seem to be the most creative of tacticians.

Only this time, once the Covenant on the surface were finished with their business, the alien ships wouldn't be running.

\_Hopefully the Chief, Team Eight, and that Elite will make finishing that job hell for those Covenant downstairs.\_

Hood lingered on this thought for a while, absentmindedly monitoring the local COM chatter. Admiral Harper, who commanded the remains of the UNSC fleet, was busy organizing the hundred-fifty-odd ships into a suitable defensive formation. Admiral Hood knew Harper to be an excellent tactician, so he did not interfere.

The Admiral ordered his Radar Officer, Lieutenant McCarthy, to keep his eyes peeled for any new developments and gave Lieutenant Carter permission to fire on any enemy ship foolish enough to venture within range. Satisfied for the time being, Hood sat back in the bridge's

"hot seat" and closed his eyes for a moment.

The last four days had been utterly exhausting. Two times had the Covenant attacked Earth, two times had they managed to slip a ship or two past the orbital defenses, and once had they boarded the \_Cairo\_ herself, nearly destroying the station. Once they had been beaten back, only to a return with an exponentially larger fleet.

\_I'm getting too old for this job. But if I left, who would do it?\_

\_More importantly, who would do it right?\_

\_There's very few that can, and fewer still who actually want to do the job. Still, I'm not going to be leaving for a while yet, even if I wanted to. Unless the Covenant cut me short, of course.\_

An alarm blared throughout the bridge. Inwardly, the Admiral gave a sigh of despair, and his thoughts on his mortality were forgotten. \_Not a moment's peace.\_ His eyes snapped open and he called for a report.

"Slipspace rupture!" said Lieutenant McCarthy. "Five degrees dark of the rotational axis of Mercury. Just one small rupture, sir; looks like a single ship."

"Admiral Harper, we've got this one covered. Stay on your toes and watch that Covenant fleet," ordered Hood over the fleet SecureCOM. He turned to Lieutenant Carter, who, as gunnery officer, had control of the \_Cairo\_'s positioning thrusters. "Carter, bring us about eighty-nine point seven degrees. Charge the MAC, keep it hot, but do \_not\_ open fire until you are ordered to. If it's a single ship, it might be a friendly one."

The bridge crew watched the patch of distorted space anxiously. True to McCarthy's prediction, there was only a single ship â€" a sleek but scarred and pitted Covenant destroyer. Admiral Hood was unsure of whether or not to blow the ship into millions of tiny fragments; for all he knew, it could be a Separatist vessel. He made a cutting gesture at Lieutenant Carter, whose hand was straying to open fire.

"They're hailing us, sir," reported Lieutenant Parsons.

"Put it through, bridge speakers," the Admiral ordered. "But keep the firing solution online. Stay with it if it starts moving."

"\_Admiral Hood, sirâ€¦glad to see you've left some action for usâ€¦well, we brought you a little present, too. And thanks to its speed, we got here in time to help slag some Covenant with their own weapons. Damn, the irony. I'm glad this party ain't over yet,"\_ said a slow, drawling, and unmistakably human voice. Hood recognized the voice, as he had awarded this particular man the Colonial Cross barely half a week ago.

"Sergeant Avery Johnson, it's a pleasure to hear from you. Your 'present' might come in handy," replied the Admiral. \_\*\*Very\*\*\_ handy. An intact â€" well, relatively intact â€" Covenant ship for scientists and engineers to salivate over. That is, if Earth doesn't become an orbiting ball of molten rock.\_

"Sergeant, are you in command of that ship? And what of Commander Keyes?" he continued.

"\_No, sir, this is a Separatist-controlled ship. The CO of this ship â€" the \_Duty and Honor\_, if you wanted to know â€" is an Elite named Sora 'Sonamee. We heard about the little peace treaty you so nicely announced, but we became friends before that, so don't worry, we've already patched up things. Long story. And as for Keyes, she's unharmed and on board as well, but I can't say the same for the rest of \_In Amber Clad\_'s crew. Like I said, it's a long story, sir, and I'll tell it to you later, if you don't mind. Oh and, no problem about the present. I was gonna wait until your birthday, but hey, we may not be around by then. Not if I have anything to say about it, though."\_

The Admiral chuckled at the Sergeant's irrepressible humor. "Good. Very well, then. Sergeant, I want you, Commander Keyes, and any other surviving human personnel back on board \_Cairo\_ ASAP. Get yourself to a dropship, soldier."

"\_Yes, sir!"\_ replied Johnson. The Admiral switched channels to speak to his fleet once more.

"Stand down, men. It's one of ours."

He watched as the \_Duty and Honor\_ broke from Mercury's orbit and maneuvered through the orbital defense grid to reach the \_Cairo\_. It slipped past Admiral Harper's flagship, the immense \_Marathon\_-class cruiser \_Midway\_. Sporting a staggering five MAC guns, hundreds of oversized Archer pods, a dozen Shiva missiles, and four and a half meters of Titanium-A covering it from stem to stern, it was one of the few ships in the UNSC fleet able to stand toe-to-toe with Covenant ships, absolutely dwarfing any other UNSC ship. It was powered by a network of reactors with output equaling more than that of \_four\_ destroyers, giving it impressive speed despite its huge size. The \_Midway\_ tracked the Separatist ship as it moved past, which would have made Admiral Hood a little apprehensive had he been on board the \_Duty and Honor\_. Five MAC guns could disintegrate the Covenant destroyer instantly.

It was just more evidence of the already-proven fact that there was still distrust, even hatred, between the two factions, but mainly emanating from the humans as they were the ones with hundreds of their planets and billions of their kind slaughtered.

"Carter, allow MAC capacitors to drain to standby status, 75," Hood ordered, noticing the full charge indicator blinking insistently.

"Aye, sir," replied the Lieutenant, and with a few commands the bar sank to three-quarters charge, and the number slowly dropped to 75, relieving the stress on the reactor.

The Separatist destroyer aligned itself with the Cairo, falling into a geosynchronous orbit alongside the MAC station, then turned and dropped shields on one of its starboard docking bays. A Pelican dropship drifted out, jetted towards the \_Cairo\_ and was docked within half a minute.



The heavy bridge doors hissed open to admit Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes. Both were battered but the Sergeant was especially so, probably from days of nonstop fighting. The two exhausted soldiers saluted the Admiral.

Hood returned the salutes and bid them to stand at ease.

"Glad to see the two of you made it in time to join us. From the looks of it, you've been to hell and back, so I'll make this brief. As you probably know, we don't have time for chitchat right now, so we have to save the discussion of your ordeal for later. There is one important thing you need to know. Currently, the Covenant have slipped three ships past our defenses and landed troops on the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar. The Chief, an elite team of ODSTs, and assorted Marines and Separatists are currently stationed on Zanzibar, and personally, I think they'll give any enemy foot troops a severe migraine. However, we need to do something about those Covenant ships, before they decided to stop playing games with ground forces and vaporize our troops. Before that, there are two issues I need to address. First, are you two the only humans who made it?"

"No, sir, a squad of ODSTs, the Pelican's pilot, and a small team of techs also made it, but that's the lot," replied Johnson.

The Admiral nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. Second, I am going to assume that In Amber Clad has been lost. Correct?"

Commander Keyes answered this time. "Yes, sir, enemy forces seized control of it." She shuddered inwardly at the specific enemy that had overtaken her ship, but did not mention it.

"I'm sorry to hear that, as well." In truth, he was not overly concerned, but he was not about to admit that openly. In Amber Clad had been a corvette, a class of ships that were even smaller than frigates and mainly useless in capital ship combat. One less corvette could hardly turn the tide of this particular battle. "You followed the Cole Protocol first? Wiped the NAV coordinates of Earth?"

Keyes wrinkled her brow in confusion. "Sir, with respect, that wouldn't be necessary. The Covenant already know where Earth is. Otherwise they wouldn't be here."

"Oh. Yes, that's right." Dammit, I keep forgetting that. Been following the Protocol to the letter for decades, but what good did it do us anyway?\_

"Keyes, I think it would be best if you find quarters on board and wait this one out. Unfortunately, I don't have any spare ships for you to command. And Johnson, I think you should get some rest as well. God knows what you've been through."

"What? Sir, I don't need any rest! Just some food in my belly, some fresh ammo in my belt, and I'll be good to go. I'd like to get down to Zanzibar and help the Chief out. With your permission, of course, sir," said Johnson indignantly.

Before the Admiral could reply, Keyes spoke up as well. "And I have no intention of just 'waiting it out' while the Covenant destroy Earth. I can help out sir, even if you give me janitorial duty."

Admiral Hood smiled slightly. The two reminded him of disobedient youngsters protesting against the orders of a parent.

"In that case, Johnson, you're free to visit the galley and armory as you wish. After you are finished, return to the Duty and Honor. I have plans for it, and luckily for you, Sergeant, my plans coincide with yours. And as for you, Commander, I'm sure I can find something for you to do. I've heard the latrines could use a good washingâ€|"

The Sergeant left the bridge, chuckling to himself.

\* \* \*

><strong>0452 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar)  
<strong>\*\*\*â™| \*\*\*\*Separatist destroyer Duty and Honor, in  
geosynchronous orbit around Earth, former Cairo  
battlecluster.\*\*

Sergeant Johnson felt quite pleased, given the situation. He had just bolted down a large meal, was armed with his selected choice of weapons â€" a S2 AM Sniper Rifle with custom smart-linked stabilized scope and two M6E heavy magnums â€" and was headed down to the surface, where he could be of some use wiping out Covenant scum instead of helplessly sitting at a viewport watching plasma and MAC shells drawing lines across space. Moreover, he had been allowed to keep his Trident Mark I suit. Aside from the increased protection and strength, there was an added bonus. If a disobedient Marine was mouthing off and he didn't want to listen to it, a simple flick of the audio receiver switch would do the trick. Pure genius.

The Sergeant stood alongside the Arbiter, 'Vadumee, and 'Sonamee on the bridge of the Duty and Honor. They were gathered on the bridge's central platform, watching the main forward viewscreen, where Admiral Hood's face shimmered and jumped. Johnson listened attentively to the Admiral's exact orders. He was not so alert for naught; what was at stake here was enormous.

"'Sonamee, you are to take the Duty and Honor into Earth's atmosphere, to the coordinates provided. They should lead you to an island designated by humans as 'Zanzibar.' There you must insert Johnson, with accompanying troops if you wish. Currently, long-range communications in the region are inoperable, but from satellite recon, we can see that the entire beach has been overrun by Covenant forces. Therefore, a naval artillery strike from surface ships is already in progress. The LZ should be clear by the time if you arrive; if not, you are free to destroy any remaining hostiles with your ship's weaponry or by any other means that you see fit. Once you have dropped your troops, you must stay on station above Zanzibar to assist the ground forces in fending off any further attacks."

"Yes, Admiral Hood," replied 'Sonamee, who of the three high-ranking Elites was the most willing to accept orders from a human superior, having been used to taking orders for nearly all of his military career as he was still only of moderate rank among Elites unlike his two companions. "But what of the Covenant vessels in the vicinity?"

"For the moment, the three hostile ships themselves should not

present a threat to you," replied the Admiral. "However, under no circumstances should you attack those Covenant ships alone. Should you do this, your single destroyer will be no match for their combined firepower. If you feel that they are becoming an imminent threat to you or the ground troops, only then do you have permission to open fire. As I mentioned before, we have a significant surface navy battlegroup in the area. In the event that the enemy ships do launch an assault, the battlegroup will provide you with heavy MAC artillery and fighter/bomber support. But there is still no sense in inviting harm when it is not needed."

"Agreed," said 'Sonamee.

"Good. Now, Johnson, your task may be considerably easier or more difficult, depending on the circumstances. Once on Zanzibar Island, you and any Separatists that may decide to join you -- the number of which, I imagine, may be quite numerous -- will assist the Master Chief in repelling any further ground-based Covenant assaults. He will give you the specifics if and when that time comes. The Chief has control of the ground op, and it will stay that way, so you are required to obey all of his orders. That clear, Johnson, 'Vadumee, Arbiter?" Admiral Hood asked, obviously knowing that all three pugnacious warriors would be in on the battle and could possibly have conflicting opinions.

'Vadumee and the Arbiter looked at one another and nodded. Johnson replied with a customary "Yes, sir!"

The Admiral paused, surveying them. He nodded in satisfaction. "That's all. Good luck, soldiers. Hood out." The screen went blank.

Johnson turned to his alien comrades. "It's on, boys. Now that we're all finished jawin', let's get ready to kick some Covenant ass."

\* \* \*

><strong>0452 hours, February 22, 2553 (UNSC Military Calendar)  
<strong>\*\*\*â™| \*\*\*\*EAP Wind Power Station 7, Zanzibar Island,  
Tanzania, Africa. Earth.\*\*

Captain Summers tapped his foot and took a drag from his cigarette. He waited.

The remnants of his force and 'Canarmee waited as well. Some wondered when the Chief and his Deltas would return from their investigation of the power station. The majority, however, waited for hammer to fall. They were growing impatient, for in their minds it was to meet their fate quickly rather than be left to anticipate it.

He had already tasked one of his Marines with supplying the medical staff with weapons and ammunition. Undoubtedly they would be forced to engage the Covenant, as well. Even the wounded who were still conscious received M6Cs and M7s.

\_As long as they can hold a weapon and pull the triggerâ€|\_ thought Summers. He raised the cigarette to his mouth again.

"Captain, sir, that's a bad habit. Smoking kills, you know," remarked one of Allen's rocket jockeys.

Summers gave a sarcastic grin. "Shut your yap, Private Mitchell. We're all gonna be dead in a couple of hours either way."

He instantly regretted this statement. He was a Captain, dammit â€" he was supposed to set an example for those under his command and keep their morale as high as possible, not cement a fear that most of them already had.

"No. Maybe not. With the Chief and those Helljumpers on steroids around, we might stand a chance," he said slowly. "You heard of what that Spartan can do, Mitchell?"

"Yeah. I heard," replied the Private. "But I want to see him in action for myself."

The Captain made no reply to this, knowing that they would all be put to the test in short order.

A faint but deep rumble shook the station, growing in volume, like that of thunder overhead but magnified many times. The shockwave shook off the ash that had accumulated on tip of Captain Summers's cigarette.

Several soldiers looked about, puzzled, as the rumbling increased in volume and rapidity.

"Looks like General MacArthur or someone else up top decided to take things into their own hands," said the Captain, shrugging and stamping out the remains of his cigarette. "Sounds like naval artillery to me."

A Marine voiced a concern of his. "But sir, there's still going to be some Covenant that survive the attack. What about them?"

Summers gave him a hard look. "'What about them?' We're going to find them and grind them into the dust too. What's wrong, soldier, you scared? Well, you shouldn't be. Without their numbers those apes on steroids and Jackals will be cake for the Chief and his boys, not to mention us."

"Not scared, sir," said the Marine. "Just wondering."

Captain Summers grunted in reply and flicked on his helmet COM. "Chief, I assume you've felt or heard the Navy's response to ourâ€|visitors?"

\_"Affirmative, Captain. It will make our task considerably easier. Wait a moment."\_ Summers could hear the Spartan conversing on the other end before he returned. \_"Captain Allen says we're just about wrapped up here. My squad and I will be returning shortly."\_

"Yes, Chief. Good to hear that."

For the first time in weeks, Summers gave a genuine smile. He finally had good reason to. The Covenant ground forces â€" for once â€" were the ones on the receiving end of a merciless artillery barrage, while their own ships were reluctant to be on the delivering end of such an attack. Furthermore, the Chief and a team of Delta ODSs were present, giving off a moral-boosting aura of invincibility to the

rank-and-file Marines. Although the Covenant fleet was still an imminent threat to the safety of the Earth, the Captain's perception of the world seemed to have shrunk to tiny Zanzibar Island. In the last few hours, his life had been at stake, and the stress of the battle had taken his mind off of all else. He was merely happy to be alive. And in his little world of Zanzibar, there was not much else that could go wrong, especially with the tides turning against the Covenant. Or so it seemed.

The Captain settled his back against the wall and kicked his feet up against a nearby crate. After all that he and his men had accomplished or attempted to accomplish on that day, he felt that they would surely receive some well-deserved rest.

\*\*\_ \_ \_\*\*

The clanking of boots against solid metal beat a rhythmical pattern as John, Delta Team Eight, and Captain Allen made their way through the winding corridors of the mostly-empty power station.

John had not seen much to rouse his attention; anyway, the majority of the Covenant forces were likely to have been eliminated. The Chief could complete the simple cleanup task without assistance; however, the addition of some capable allies would just facilitate the job. While he acknowledged that each challenge he faced and conquered made him an even more deadly warrior, the last few weeks had been harrowing enough so that he was glad to be assigned to a simple mission for a change.

"Just one last thing to note, Chief," said Captain Allen as they rounded another corner. The corridor they had just entered dead-ended with a dull steel-gray door, rusted at the edges and chipped in several places. The Captain unceremoniously kicked the rusting door open.

John and the Helljumpers were greeted with the salty odor of the sea and a spray of water across their visored faces. A few of the ODSTs retracted their visors to allow the spray to hit their faces as they stepped out onto the tiny, rock-studded patch of sand. The Spartan considered doing the same but figured there would be plenty of time for relaxation later.

"Stay sharp, Deltas," he warned, looking around cautiously for Covenant that could be scouting out the perimeter of the island. But he soon saw that there was no way for the enemy to reach the secluded patch of rocky beach. Thus reassured, he lowered his rifle.

"I figured this would be a good place for you to launch an assault against the Covenant. They probably have the front entrances covered by hundreds of troops. In those armor suits you could probably just walk around to the Covenant position underwater and attack them from behind. That'll cause some major chaos and I can lead the rest of the survivors in a classic pincer from the main entrance of the power station to pin down the survivors if you need help," Allen said.

The Chief nodded agreement, but his attention had been drawn to a patch of flat rock recently exposed by the last wave washing over. With his enhanced vision he could see strangle glyph-like inscriptions carved onto the rock's surface, eerily lit by dim rays of moonlight.

Immediately John felt a chill run down his spine. Those inscriptions were all too familiar to him.

He nearly ran over to the rock, sweeping sand off of it to reveal it to be a thick rectangular affair. Digging with his hands, the Chief realized that the rock was embedded quite deeply, and exposed some sort of seam running along the rock. A vague thought crossed his mindâ€”\_could this be a door?\_

Only one thing was certain to the bewildered Spartan.

\_This is what the Covenant came here for\_.

\* \* \*

><strong>2105 hours, April 3, 2013 (GMT+3) <strong>\*\*â™| \*\*\*\*Zanzibar Island, Tanzania, Africa.\*\*

\*\*Two hundred and forty years earlier.\*\*

A warm breeze blew through the streets of Stone Town, Zanzibar. The normally bustling streets of the city at the midnight party hour, usually packed with the inhabitants of Zanzibar's cultural heart, famous for its tourist industry and spices, were completely deserted, save four figures striding slowly down the darkened central city avenue, dressed in camouflage and full body armor and outlined by the setting sun behind them.

The four were members of the United States 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (Airborne), more colloquially known as "Delta Force" or the "D-boys", one of the world's premier counter-terrorism units alongside the British SAS and other elite units. They had been deployed to Zanzibar Island to counter one of the greatest threats the United States had faced since the attack on September 11, 2001.

A group of unidentified but clearly radical and ruthless terrorists had somehow obtained a tactical nuclear weapon, which in itself was a mystery as countries who had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as other nuclear powers all vehemently denied having any contact with the terrorists, although obviously one could be lying or have lax nuclear security. They had placed several satellite phone calls announcing their threat to the world, a rather foolish move as this revealed their location â€” Zanzibar Island. The move was so brazen, however, that some speculated that the terrorists were openly taunting whoever their opponents might be. As of yet, they had not made any major demands.

Granted, the model they mentioned was a small nuclear weapon by modern standards and relatively clean but still packed enough explosive energy to decimate a major city and saturate the surrounding metropolitan area with at least some radiation. Radiological scans of the area had confirmed that the terrorists weren't merely bluffing. Emergency departures had been scheduled for many tourists visiting the island as well as some of its inhabitants, and those unlucky enough to be trapped on the island barricaded themselves inside their hotels, homes, and businesses.

Though the group was not making any threats at the time, no one would

be waiting for a psychotic terrorist cell to make the first move. Thus, America's elite counter-terrorist special forces unit â€" the 1st SFOD-D (A) â€" had been deployed to neutralize the threat quickly, efficiently, and silently. Four Delta operatives had arrived via nighttime beach insertion the previous day using rigid inflatable boats â€" "ribbies." They wore civilian clothing and carried their equipment in duffel bags and suitcases, slipping in seamlessly as tourists with the civilian population to minimize the chance of detection.

Separate elite teams from Britain's SAS and France's GIGN in addition to other major nations' teams had also slipped onto the island and were on standby to instantly provide assistance should Delta Force fail to accomplish its initial objectives or encounter significant resistance. Delta Force had been selected for the mission due to the fact that it had arrived first and had a chance to reconnoiter the immediate area while still in civilian dress, though the other teams felt indignant at what they thought was second-class treatment and relegation to a supporting role.

Still, they recognized the seriousness of the situation, and were ready to assist the Americans at a moment's notice. Fortunately all were well-versed in English and a joint operations center, or JOC, had been established for all teams to coordinate all their efforts.

Delta Lead Gary Fletcher mentally sized up the daunting task placed before him and his three comrades. His prime concern was that the terrorists had already determined how to break the nuclear warhead's safety locks and arm the weapon. This was unlikely, given the relatively short timeframe; but still possible and certainly something to be regarded with apprehension. Still, even if the weapon was armed and detonated by the terrorists in desperation, it would mean the loss of only a few lives â€" those of the Delta Force team and other special ops units currently on the island. Their few, trivial lives were something that Fletcher knew all them would be willing to give in exchange for the lives of millions of innocents in the crosshairs of the warhead.

His three teammates, operating and communicating under their first names of John, Martin, and Steve were wired tight as well. None exhibited any signs of nervousness or lack of confidence about what they had been tasked with. The team moved swiftly out of the empty town where they would stick out like sore thumbs and into a nearby forest, where the trees and dense canopy afforded them some cover from the dusk light.

While casually conversing with the local populace several days previously the Deltas had discovered that there had been suspicious activity regarding that particular area of the island. The city residents and tourists had been denied access to the area for several years now, with the government citing environmental protection as their motive for this. However the threat of imprisonment for merely setting foot inside the forest and armed patrols led some to believe that saving wildlife was not the true reason behind the government's actions.

As the Tanzanian government's financial records indicated, the country had not purchased any equipment that could be potentially used for the manufacture of nuclear weapons; nor did it possess the

indigenous ability to produce such equipment. Therefore, it could be safely assumed that it was not a secret nuclear weapons research facility that had been seized by the terrorists, but some form of clandestine research or excavation was almost certainly taking place in the forest. Whatever it was, the Deltas would soon find out, and they expected determined resistance from the terrorists, who had enough skill to obtain a nuclear weapon and overpower the guards in the region.

Despite the warm breeze constantly sweeping across the island, the four were relatively comfortable within their highly advanced, microclimate-controlled armor. As the elite soldiers of the world's most influential and powerful economy, as well as the world's largest military spender, their equipment was nothing less than state-of-the-art. The equipment they were wearing was derived from the standard Objective Force Warrior combat system that the regular Army troops were issued. However, it was lighter yet offered significantly more resistance to small-arms fire than the standard body armor, had more powerful electronics and communications, and was fueled by higher-efficiency fuel cells. Of course, this came at a massive price. Each Delta's equipment was many times as expensive as the standard grunt's, but it was the U.S. military's hope that they would put it to good use.

The Deltas wore the latest iteration of Pinnacle Armor's Dragon Skin vest, manufactured out of overlapping, ultralight ceramic composite disks that provided multi-hit torso protection for rifle calibers up to and including 7.62 x 51 mm rounds, fragmentation, and other small arms weapons. Their helmets were manufactured from a superior derivative of the Kevlar-succeeding M5 fiber, dubbed M5C. They provided nearly as much ballistic resistance as the Deltas' chest armor, and on which were mounted aluminium oxynitride-infused goggles. Apart from protecting the operators' faces from 9mm and fragmentation threats, these goggles had miniature heads-up displays, monitoring each soldier's vitals and providing satellite/UAV-linked information about their fellow squad members and surroundings. The displays were also linked to a specialized optical/thermal/infrared camera suite attached to each soldier's helmet. Rounding out their protective gear were strap-on arm and leg armor sections also synthesized out of M5C fiber, providing the Deltas with nearly full-body multi-hit small-to-medium caliber and fragmentation resistance. Amazingly, the whole system only weighed 24 pounds including fuel cells; a testament to what money could buy, as ten years ago it weighed approximately that just to provide adequate upper body protection for a soldier, much less complete protection and a whole host of electronic enhancements. The Deltas had undergone extensive physical training and were also the first to be implanted with the latest in nanotechnology developments, which fed their biomonitors and enhanced strength and reflexes.

Of course, the soldier's most important accessory was his weapon, and all four carried variants of the FN SCAR-M (Medium Caliber) assault rifles, US SOCOM standard-issue. Each had been customized to each operator's preference with a myriad array of specialized optics, sights, and handles mounted to the Picatinny rails. Fletcher, Martin, and Steve's rifles were chambered for 6.8 mm Remington SPC, very effective at short and medium-range, firing from 40-round magazines and 14-inch barrels.

The team sharpshooter, John, preferred the 6.5 mm Grendel round for



its superior long-range performance, combined with a 20-inch barrel for increased muzzle velocity, bipod and enhanced optics, and used less-obtrusive, short 20-round magazines. However he had chosen the parasniper configuration of the SCAR over an actual sniper because of the possibility of closer-range combat, where full-automatic fire would be a bonus. As such he kept a few full-size 40-round magazines as backup for such a situation. All four had affixed sound/noise suppressors to their rifles and carried suppressed M10 .45 ACP Joint Combat Pistols, preferring to keep their assault stealthy as long as possible.

Before proceeding further in the forest the Deltas halted, waiting for the last rays of the sun to slip beneath the peaceful waves of the Indian Ocean. As darkness fell the team switched on their infrared cameras, as any warm-blooded enemy would become an easy target against the cooler, bluer forest background. They began to creep forward cautiously, wary of enemy guards.

Delta Lead abruptly motioned his team to take cover. They crouched down behind trees, shouldering rifles. Fletcher switched to standard night optics for a better look. A lone sentry was patrolling back and forth, apparently with a flashlight crudely taped to his rifle. The guard gave no indication that he had noticed the Deltas. Fletcher keyed his radio and whispered "John" over the radio, and held two fingers at the guard while making a cutting gesture across his throat, indicating silence.

The Delta nodded and slung his rifle, as the SCAR was suppressed but there would still be the crack of the supersonic round it fired. He freed his pistol from its holster slowly without so much as a rustle. As he clicked off the safety, a reticule appeared on his HUD, courtesy of a tiny wireless pointer integrated into the weapon and aligned with the barrel. He calmly placed the reticule over the guard and squeezed the trigger three times.

A trio of thumps were heard among the clamor of the forest nightlife, and the guard fell with a gurgle and three holes in his chest.

The team moved up quickly, scanning for further activity and policing the dead sentry's weapon. After calling out all clears they continued their advance. Several guards they encountered were neutralized in similar fashion to the first. However the time interval between encounters grew shorter each time, indicating that they were getting closer to something big.

Fletcher spotted a quartet of guards clustered around a warm patch of ground, most likely a campfire that had been recently extinguished. Alarmingly, he noticed that the guards were on alert, rifles readied. Most likely they had realized that the lack of radio reports from the outer sentries meant something was afoot.

As they watched, one man suddenly swept his light's beam over the Deltas' position, and shouted a warning to his comrades.

The Deltas needed no orders from their leader. They opened fire, cutting down three guards instantly and pockmarking the bark of the trees behind them. The last remaining guard sprayed the four commandos with automatic weapons fire, backing away in fear. As the badly aimed shots zipped past his head, Fletcher coolly sent a burst

of five 6.8 mm rounds into the sentry. The man fell in a bloody heap.

Fletcher looked around at his men. "Everyone OK?"

No serious injuries, though Delta John had taken two ricochets to the chest. His body armor had taken the brunt of the blow, so for the most part he was fine.

Obviously the terrorists were fully aware of the Deltas' presence now. They reloaded as they advanced, moving more quickly now as they did not need to be absolutely stealthy. However they still tried to minimize their presence and kept silencers on, as it would cause more confusion and disorientation among their opponents.

Delta Lead Fletcher could tell that there were bright spotlights of some sort deeper inside the forest, as the trees ahead were faintly outlined with a harsh white glow unlike that of the moon's soft rays. As they drew closer to the source of the light, the trees began thinning out. Beyond the last of the trees the Deltas could see several intense, pole-mounted lights shining down into a roughly circular depression in the ground.

It soon became obvious that the depression was massive, resembling an open-pit mine more than anything else. Machined groves were clearly visible in the sides of the pit, proving the excavation to be a product of human engineering. At the center of the pit a rectangular rock stood, approximately ten feet high, four feet wide and six feet deep. A groove ran along the rock, following the sides of the rock and bisecting it in the middle. The two sides formed by the groove slid open, and four more hostiles exited. Before the doors closed what appeared to be an elevator could be seen descending deeper below ground, but riding on beams of blue light rather than the usual cables.

None of the Deltas paid much attention to the odd elevator exit, however. Their eyes were on the crowd of terrorists milling about around the central depression. Some were in hastily dug foxholes; others took cover behind rocks or other obstacles. Fletcher counted at least thirty, and they looked well-equipped too — Kevlar vests, assorted weapons including AK-47 and G3 rifles, helmets, and handheld radios.

Fletcher quickly ordered his men to spread out. He made a fist, mimicked pulling a pin out of it, held up two fingers, and pointed at the enemy position. The Deltas gave their acknowledgement, readied two grenades each, and threw them.

Just as Delta Steve threw the last of the eight-grenade volley, he saw a guard turn to the source of movement, squint, and raise his rifle. A grenade landed two meters behind the guard and the rock he was hiding behind, detonating and sending deadly shrapnel through the man's back. His shots went wild and skyward as the other grenades exploded in a rhythmic chain of ear-pounding concussions.

Yells of pain were drowned out by the Delta's rifles as they opened fire, pouring 6.5 and 6.8 mm rounds through the air. This barrage of fire and the opening volley of grenades had killed about ten terrorists outright and injured several more. However, the rest rallied after the initial confusion and began to return fire. Delta

John fell back to a small hill they had passed several meters back, using the slight elevation as his advantage to try and pick off a few of the guards, but was frustrated by the trees that often blocked his line of fire.

Delta Steve felt several bullets pound into his left shoulder, one of which penetrated his armor. "I'm hit!" he yelled as he ducked back behind a tree to dress the wound.

"How bad?" Fletcher called back, still firing. A pool of spent brass was beginning to collect next to his tree.

"Don't worry I got it," Steve grunted as he extracted the bullet from his shoulder, grinding his teeth at the searing pain. Fortunately it had not penetrated deep as his shoulder armor had still taken a lot of the impact velocity. He quickly wrapped a dressing around it and downed a non-drowsy painkiller, knowing that him putting out more rounds was more important than agonizing behind a tree.

Martin felled a MP5-wielding guard, heard his SCAR give an empty click, and quickly retreated behind his tree to load a new magazine. He had just slotted a fresh clip in when he heard a nearby clink over the chatter of gunfire and turned to see a dark spherical object on the ground beside him, illuminated by the glow of the heavy industrial lights mounted on the pit's perimeter.

Panicking, Martin punted the grenade away, but it had only flown a few feet before it exploded, throwing Martin into the ground and into darkness.

Martin awoke with ears ringing to find one of his fellow Deltas standing over him. He could see his friend's mouth moving but couldn't make out what he was saying. Parts of his skin prickled as if afire as he shakily stood, undoubtedly where shrapnel had punctured his armor or hit uncovered portions of his body. He would live, though. He hoped.

Martin waved his comrade away as his hearing slowly returned. Fortunately his helmet radio's headphones had dampened the sound of the explosion and prevented serious ear damage. Still, as he raised his rifle, the Delta's skin continued to burn.

Only a few of the guards were still on their feet and able to fire. Fletcher relaxed a little and paused to check his ammunition supplies. He still had about half of his magazines left full, and no member of his team had been badly wounded yet. The Delta Leader was feeling confident about the outcome of the mission when he saw a spray of red in his peripheral vision and turned to see Steve go down with a scream.

"Shit â€" Steve!" Fletcher yelled, running over to help his teammate. At first he couldn't tell where the Delta had been hit because his body armor had multiple holes in it, but then he saw blood seeping from two holes in Steve's lower abdomen armor.

"Martin, John, covering fire!" he ordered, dragging Steve back to a reasonably safe distance. He unfastened his wounded comrade's vest, took a quick look at Steve's injuries, and keyed his COM.

"JOC, this is Delta Lead. I'm requesting immediate evac for one of my

men, he's shot up pretty bad. I'm sending coordinates of our position now, over." Fletcher paused to feed data from the GPS subsystem of his electronics suite.

\_"Affirmative, Delta Lead,"\_ replied a cool voice with a distinct British accent. \_"Medical teams are on their way now. What is the status of the mission? Over."\_

"Inflicted approximately thirty casualties on the enemy. Have reached an excavation of some sort, seems to be an elevator to a subterranean chamber. No estimate on how many hostiles remain underground but resistance has been stiff and the terrorists are well-equipped. My guess is the warhead is being kept underground. Request additional teams to clear the area."

\_"Roger that, Fletcher. I'm sending-"\_

The rest of the message was obscured by a burst of static. Fletcher felt the ground beneath his feet behind to rumble.

\_Oh, shit.\_

\* \* \*

>Note: Although I "attempt" to proofread and make my work error-free, I nearly always write in a rushed pace (due to my procrastination skills) and proofread somewhat lazily. Therefore, a lot of my work is still chock full of errors and such crap. Please tolerate this, although it seems the majority of you readers already do. Thanks!  
<p>Also note: I'm a high school student for God's sake, not a freaking scientist or geology expert or whatever. Don't expect me to get everything right. A lot of the time I have really no idea what I'm talking about, even though I sound like I do. So don't go bashing me for some little detail like "wait, you got Zanzibar's geography wrong."<p>

High school is a bitch. All honors meant a lot of work, plus track practice every day and doing other garbage for college meant I had very little time available for stuff like this for the whole year. And during breaks, I was too busy chilling with friends or just enjoying my downtime to pay any attention to this. I'm doubtful as to whether or not I can even spare the time to continue this. The first half of my summer was completely occupied too. I'm sorry for this, especially for those of you that stick with this story, but there's nothing I can do.

As for the fic itself, don't read too far into the terrorism subplot. I purposefully left out as many details as possible to avoid controversy. Flame me all you want for that, but I don't give.

End  
file.